TEN COMPLETE WESTERN STORIES

# FAMOUS WESTERN

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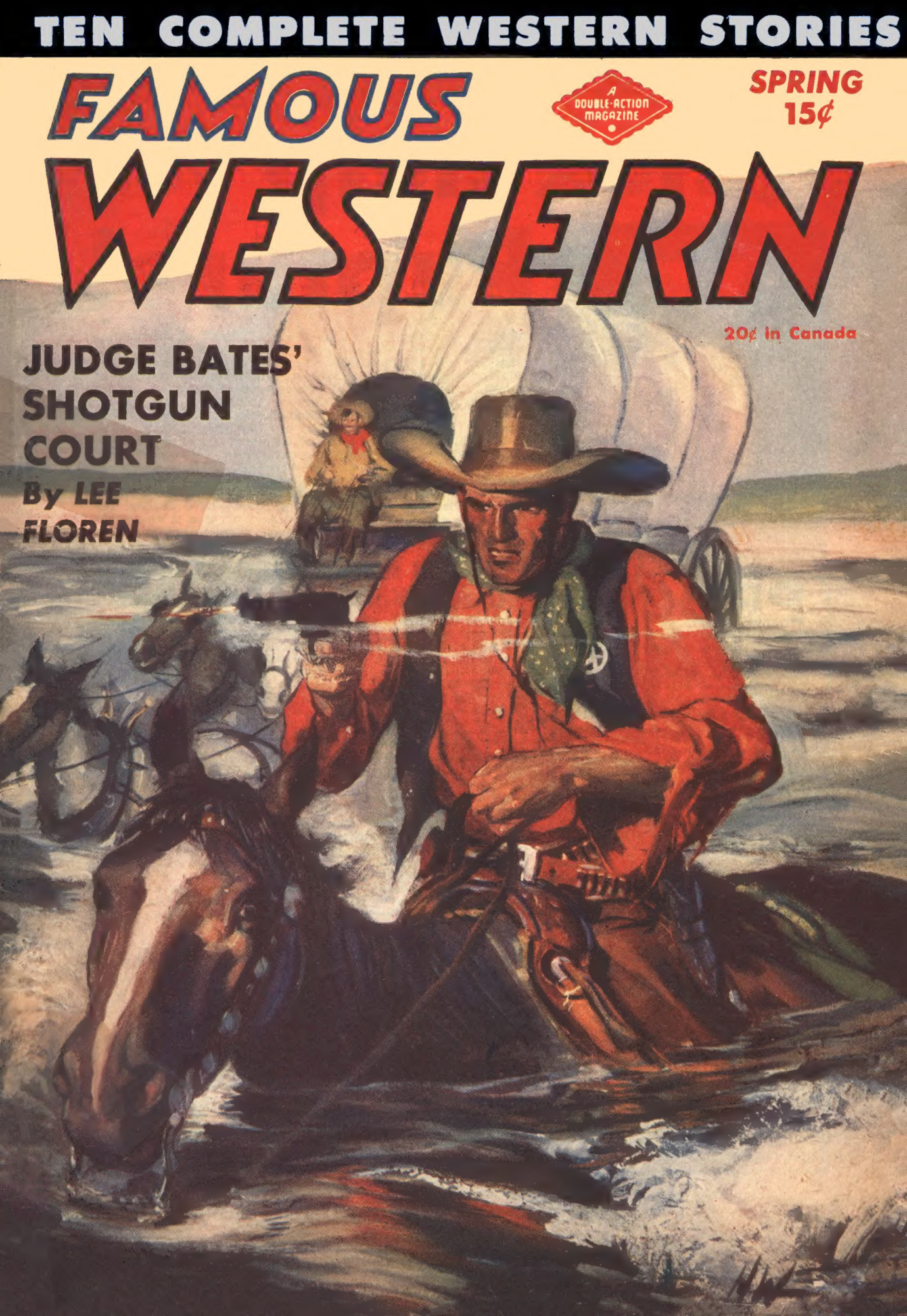
## JUDGE BATES' SHOTGUN COURT

By LEE FLOREN



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# FAMOUS WESTERN

Volume 7 ★ SPRING, 1945 ★ Number 1

## TEN COMPLETE WESTERN STORIES

**JUDGE BATES' SHOTGUN COURT** *(Novelet)*
**By Lee Floren** 10
Judge Bates finds a new use for his famous jug when he and Tobacco Jones ride on the trail of drygulchers who smoked down young Rusty Cameron!

**ACES UP—BULLETS WILD!** . . . . . **By Brett Austin** 24
A good poker player isn't the easiest hombre in the world to frame!

**MURDER AIN'T POLITE** . . . . . **By Joe Austell Small** 26
And Ben Gipson decided that even the proper etiquette for hanging wasn't to his liking—particularly when he was danged sure he hadn't killed old Dave Campbell.

**SHORTHORN DEPUTY** . . . . . **By Gunnison Steele** 35
"Paint" McCabe showed lawman Littlejohn that the best old lawdog can always find use for a new trick!

**MOUNTAIN MEN DON'T QUIT** . . . . . **By Chuck Martin** 37
And their women understand when it's a case of either kill or be killed!

**THEY DIDN'T JUST GROW** . . . . . **By Z. A. Tilghman** 44
A fact article about the men who rodded the law in the old West.

**KILLER'S BONANZA** . . . . . **By John A. Latham** 46
Old "Mosshead" Slater could take the townsfolk laughing at him—it was the danger that a helpless man would swing because of that laughter that stuck in his craw!

**HANDCUFFS FOR THE WOLF BREED** . . **By Cliff Walters** 53
The elder Tarquinn had been an outlaw, and died under the guns of the law; young Dave rode straight—but a hangnoose seemed to be his trail's end!

**HELL-ROARING HOLIDAY** . . . . . **By Cliff Campbell** 62
A true story of a big event in the early life of Comanche.

**MAN HUNTER (Novelet)** . . . . . **By C. C. Staples** 66
Big Zeb had hung up his guns long ago, but when he ran into those stagecoach bandits, nothing could stop him from going after them!

## FEATURE

**WILD WEST QUIZ** . . . . . **By Idaho Bill** 61
Before you turn to see the answers, jot down the ones you think are correct.

*Cover by H. W. Scott* *Robert W. Lowndes, Editor*

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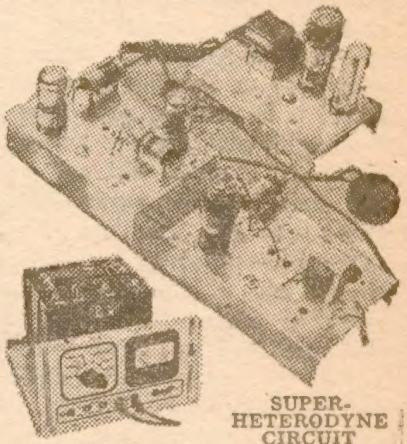

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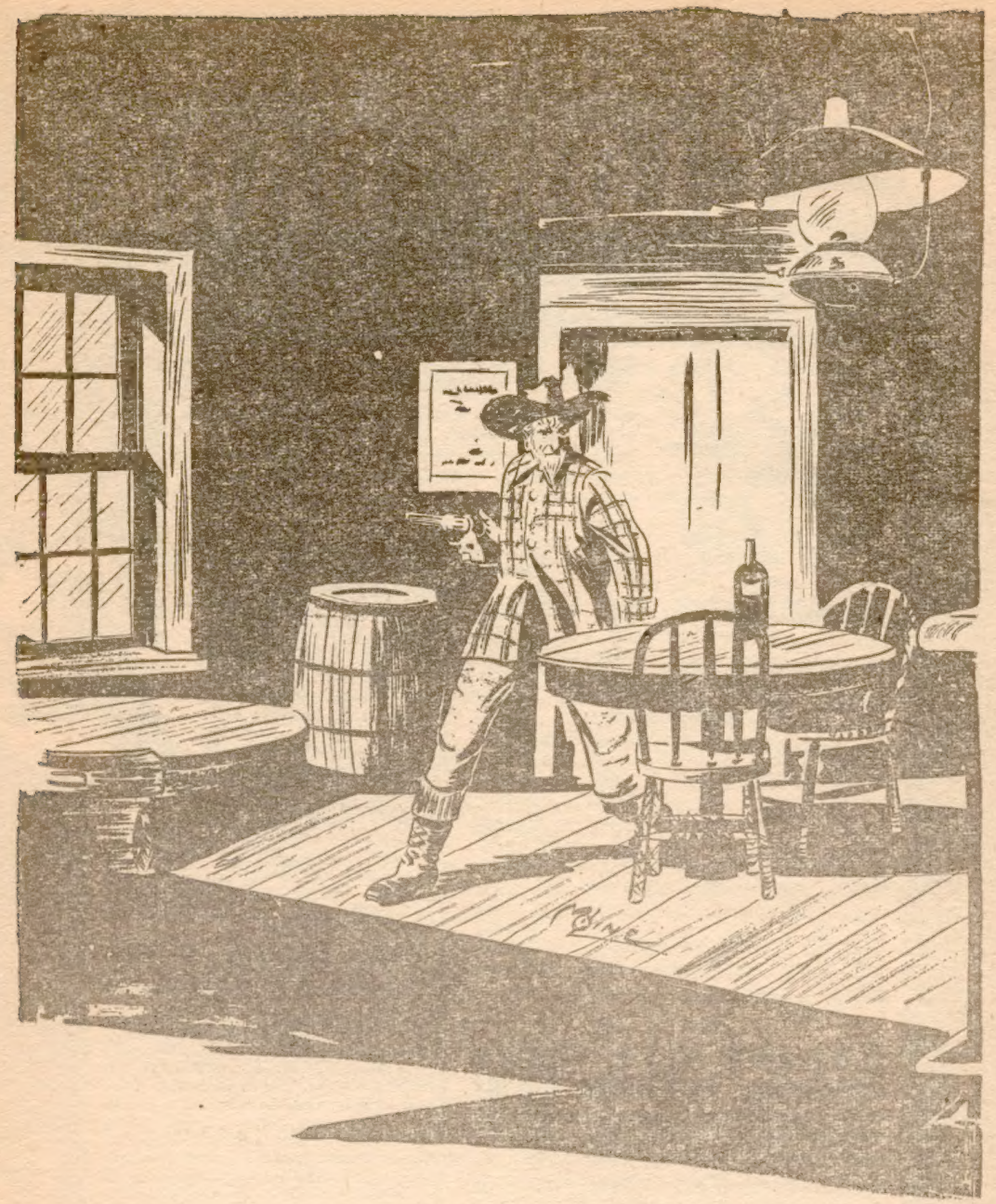


# JUDGE BATES' SHOTGUN COURT

*Bushwhack bullets had laid up Judge Bates' young friend, Rusty Cameron and the jurist's notorious quick temper wasn't improved when he found out about it. So the judge, and his side-kick, Tobacco Jones, set out to decoy more drygulch lead and capture some hombres who were overdue for a hangrope!*

*Bates yanked the man over the bar with one swift move.*

Here Is the Latest Novelet of Judge Bates and Tobacco Jones

## By LEE FLOREN

*(Author of "The Boothill Buckaroo," "Buck McKee's Gunsmoke Trap," etc.)*

JUDGE LEMANUEL BATES had many virtues, but his hair-trigger temper could not be classified as an asset; it had gotten him and postmaster Tobacco Jones into trouble too often. Now things looked as if a blowup would happen again.

A few miles out of Hangtown, a

rainstorm had hit them, chilling both oldsters to their bones; and Judge Bates' temper grew steadily. Three days before they had headed west by buckboard to visit a young friend, who ran a small outfit in the hills south of Hangtown. And now, in the first saloon the judge had entered in three days, he found that Rusty Cameron was in the local hotel, close to death.

"He's—what?" Bates demanded of the bartender.

"Jus' like I said, men," the white-apron reiterated. "Rusty's up t' the hotel now, with a bullet hole in his chest. Doc says he'll pull through, though—"

"Who shot him?" demanded Judge Bates.

The bony man shrugged. "I dunno. An' what's more, gents, I don't care to know. . . too much."

"Trouble on this range?" asked the jurist

"You could call it that."

"Your memory needs a vitalizer." The Judge toyed with his whiskey glass. "Should I or shouldn't I, Tobacco?"

"Hold onto your temper," murmured the postmaster. "Gulp down that red-eye an' let's mosey up to the hotel. A couple plugs of Star eatin' tobaccer, barman."

"An' fill up my gallon jug with your best," added the judge. He slapped the heavy crockery on the bar.

The bartender gave Tobacco his chewing-weed, then glared at the judge. "Ain't no call to slam your jug down that hard, fella. Besides, we don't sell licker in gallon lots."

"Why not?"

"Jus' don't. Boss's orders."

Judge Bates said, levelly, "Fill 'er up."

"T'hell with you!"

The judge's heavy, whiskery face showed anger. Tobacco, reading the signs, knew what was ahead. Bates' enormous paw shot across space, twisted the front of the barman's apron. Cloth ripped sibilantly.

"Let go of me or I'll—"

"You'll what?"

The bartender shot out a right fist. With his free hand, Judge Bates grabbed the man's wrist, twisted. The bartender grunted, his muscles tight. He was a big man, and he was at least ten years younger than the fat jurist.

But anger fired Judge Bates' obese body. His hand left the torn apron, went up, put a hammerlock around the man's neck. He braced his feet against the bar and bodily pulled the barkeeper over it. Then, the bartender hit the floor, and Judge Bates stepped back.

"Do I get that gallon?"

The bartender got a-foot. Sawdust clung to him but he made no move to brush it off. "You sure don't," he gritted. He shuffled forward, head pulled low, fists up, and sent in a hard right.

MOVING quickly despite his bulk, Judge Bates ducked the blow. He thrust forward, taking one on the jaw as both his fists thudded into the barkeeper's guts. The blows knocked the wind from the man, doubled him; another blow smashed into his jaw and the man went down.

Judge Bates wiped blood from his mouth. "Do I get my licker?"

The bartender moaned, s p a t. "There's a barrel—the one with a spiggot. . . He tried to get up, sank back. "A mule musta kicked me. . ."

"First time," said the judge, "that I been called a mule"

Ponderously, he ambled behind the bar, stuck his empty jug under the spiggot and gave it a twist. A smile grew on his face as the amber liquid tumbled noisely into the jug. Only then the man, standing in the doorway, spoke: "What's goin' on here?"

"Trouble, fella. You want a share of it?"

The man came forward and stood over the bartender. "Get up, Ike," he said. He clipped his words. He was heavy of girth, strong of tread; authority hung across his wide shoulders and fitted him well.

Then he said, to Judge Bates, "No, I don't want no share. You see, I own this saloon, fellow. Mike Faber's the name. And you?"

"Judge Lemanuel Bates, from Cow-

trail. An' my partner, Tobacco Jones."

Faber's greenish-gray eyes flecked from one to the other. Finally he said, "I've heard tell of you men. . . Seems as though, if I remember rightly, you are good friends of Rusty Cameron. Reckon as though I heard Rusty mention that a time or two. . . You know of Rusty's ill-luck, I reckon."

"Just heard of it." Judge Bates corked his jug. "Well, what's the dues, fellow?"

"To you," murmured Mike Faber, "it's on the house, Bates."

Judge Bates said, bluntly, "Always pay for my drinks when away from home." He saw hardness move into Faber's eyes, and knew that this man was tough.

Mike Faber said, softly, "As you say, Judge Bates. The price is five dollars. You intend to be in Hangtown long?"

"For a while, yes."

"A quiet town, once," said Mike Faber, "but no longer, Bates. The Flying Five moved in cattle, two years ago—they crowded me and young Rusty Cameron. There are gunmen here, Bates, and they ride lightly. . . "

"And you?" asked Bates.

"I own the Nine Bar S," said Mike Faber simply. "I have guns hired, too. . . But Rusty Cameron's the one that has taken the brunt, settled as he is between my spread and the Flying Five."

"Range war, huh?" asked Tobacco Jones.

"And a bloody war, too," said Mike Faber. "Already a few notches have been cut. You're ridin' into something, Bates."

"Maybeso," said Judge Bates. He put a five dollar bill on the bar. The bartender, his knees shaky, got to his feet, color returning to his face. He glared at the Judge but Mike Faber's eyes were expressionless. With Tobacco Jones walking ahead, his homely face reflecting his serious thoughts, Judge Bates went to the door, his jug under his arm and the remembrance of the anger that had flared in Mike Faber's eyes riding heavily within him.

* * *

OUTSIDE, the rain had settled to a drizzle. They stomped into the hotel lobby, kicking the mud from their boots, and the graybeard behind the desk glared at them. "Can't you clean them boots of your'n outside?"

"This is a public place," reminded the judge.

"What'd you want?"

The judge held his anger. "Old man," he said, "if I grabbed you, I'd break every bone in your skinny carcass. In what room is my young friend, Rusty Cammeron?"

"I dunno."

Judge Bates smiled, turned the register to look at it. The oldster's scrawny hand went out, and Tobacco Jones grabbed it. The oldster struggled, grunted, but Tobacco's grip was firm.

"Let's me an' you hol' hands for a while," he said.

"Room seventeen," the judge said. "Upstairs, I reckon."

The old clerk jerked suddenly. Tobacco let go of his hand and the clerk fell back, against the wall, bumped his head hard. He was holding it and moaning when the judge and Tobacco went upstairs.

"Hospitable town," said the judge.

Rusty Cameron's blue eyes lighted as he saw the pair. His red hair was tousled, and he rubbed his whiskered jaw.

"Bates and Jones! How come you two ol' cougars are in this neck of the cottonwoods?"

"Reckoned we'd hit this direction an' do some fishin'," said the judge. "Court session ain't due for a month an' Tobacco left his helper at his postoffice." Judge Bates looked meaningly at the girl who sat beside the bed. "Friend of your'n, Rusty?"

"More'n a friend," said Rusty. "She's gonna be the missus some day soon. Margie, this is Judge Bates. An' the ol' walrus is Tobacco Jones."

Margie Smith was a small girl,

neat, trim. Her hair was burnished copper, and her eyes were clear. *She's small,* the judge thought, *but she's a scrapper.*

"Well, now," said the judge, "this is a surprise. An' it's a surprise to see you in bed thisaway, Rusty."

Rusty's pale eyes hardened. "Ambush bullet," he grunted. "I'm comin' outa it, accordin' to doc, but it'll be a week or so until I can get up an' around."

"Two weeks," corrected Margie.

"She's a stubborn filly," said Rusty. "Don't know whether I oughta marry her or not. Well, then, two weeks."

"Where'd it happen?"

"I was ridin' into a canyon south of my place. This rifle talks from the brush, an' almost knocks me outa saddle. I grabs my .45 to try a shot, but it's no dice; my shoulder's too numb. I turns my bronc an' lights out with bullets breakin' aroun' me, an' I made it to the road. A neighbor picks me up in his buckboard an' takes me to town."

JUDGE Bates scowled. Tobacco Jones chewed, thought, and went to spit. But there was no spittoon and he held it.

Tobacco spoke with difficulty around his chaw. "You get a look-see at who shot at you?"

Rusty shook his head. "Nope, brush too thick, an' it all happened too fast. But I got a hunch."

"Mike Faber?" asked the judge.

"What do you know about Faber?"

Judge Bates told him about meeting Faber, and the run-in with Ike, the bartender. A frown crossed Rusty Cameron's forehead.

"Watch that Ike skunk," he murmured. "He's a back-biter, Judge. No, I don't figure it's Faber. You see, me an' Faber's fightin' the same outerfit, the Flyin' Five. Jake Mayor's the owner."

"Then you figure Mayor—?"

"Could be," said Rusty. "Either him or some of his hired gunhands. And then again, who knows. Maybe somebody mistook me for somebody else. . . . Men are driftin' across this range, Judge, an' some of them have their guns tied plenty low. . . ."

Judge Bates nodded. Tobacco crossed the room, opened the window and spat outside. "Jus' had to get rid of that chew," he apologized. He studied the mainstreet below him and asked, "What happened to your bank? The blinds are pulled low like it's closed?"

"Robbed," said Margie, "about three weeks ago."

"Somebody took a loss, huh? Or did they catch the bandits?"

"Never got a whiff of them," said the girl. "Funny thing, too, the Deep Dog mine had just deposited its payroll in the bank a day before. They were goin' to take it out that next day and then the bank got robbed."

"Who owns the bank?"

"Jake Mayor."

"Same guy that owns the Flyin' Five, huh?" asked the judge. The girl nodded and the jurist tilted his jug. Rusty watched the hot liquor flow down the fat man's leathery throat and wet his lips?"

"How about a snort, Judge?"

Judge Bates looked at Margie. "Would it hurt him?"

"You can't hurt him," she said. "If that was the case, he'd been dead long time ago."

Rusty drank, wiped his mouth. "Nice hootch." He leaned back and closed his eyes. Sympathy for the wounded youth pulsed through Judge Bates; he looked at Tobacco Jones and read the tenderness in the lanky man's watery eyes.

"You'd better go," murmured Margie. "He's awful weak yet, men." They went into the hall, leaving the youth in sleep. "You don't know what your comin' means to us two." Tears rimmed her eyes.

Judge Bates put his arm around her thin shoulders. "Hush, now, honey," he said, "he'll pull through. We'll dance at your wedding soon. ." His tone hardened and Tobacco Jones read the anger that underlaid his words. "Now where is this canyon where Rusty got shot?"

SHE TOLD him and they went down on the street. Tobacco bit off a chew as they stood under the wooden canopy and watched the rain run off into the muddy street. "What's in the deck," Judge?"

"A bunch of jokers right now," said Judge Bates. "Me, I figure it thisaway, fella. Two bit outfits tryin' to ride Rusty out. . . ."

"But Rusty hisself done said that Faber an' Mayor was fightin'. . . ."

"Mebbeso," agreed Judge Bates. "But I've seen this before, Tobacco. But what gets me, though, is why they shot Rusty when he rode into that canyon? Why didn't they plug him before that time?"

Tobacco's bony shoulders shrugged. "You got me," he admitted. "I wonder just what this Jake Mayor gent looks like."

"Me, too." A heavy man, garbed in a yellow slicker, moved down the opposite street, and paused in front of the bank. Judge Bates studied him, eyes heavy under thick brows. "You see who I see, Tobacco?"

Tobacco scowled, chewed. "Somewhere I've seen that face before. . . ."

The judge shook his ponderous head. "Nope, don't reckon you have, fella. But you've seen a picture of that gent in my office. Unless my memory's wrong, that's Henry Talbert."

Tobacco Jones' face lit up. "Yeah, I remember. . . . Years ago—about ten, I reckon— he ran a bank down in Colorado, an' got out with some funds. The law figured he would head north so they sent a wanted-placard to you. Or are we wrong, Judge?"

"I never forget a face," said the judge. "They picked Talbert up but the evidence was slim, an' Judge Carmichael gave him two years. Now what's he doin' in this town?"

"He's got the key to the bank," said Tobacco Jones.

"Maybe," said Judge Bates quietly, "we can find out somethin'. . . ."

Boots sloshing mud, they crossed the street, and the judge tried the bank door. It was locked. His fat knuckles pounded insistently on the panel. Finally the rattle of boots sounded inside, and the door opened.

"I'm Jake Mayor," the man said. "Come in, men. I suppose you are the two Pinkerton men coming to investigate the recent robbery."

"Lawmen?" asked Bates. "No, we're strangers in this town an' we aimed to meet some of the leading citizens, Mr. Mayor."

Jake Mayor said, "Thanks for the compliment, men." His sharp eyes, snuggled in rolls of fat, were needle-points probing them. "And who do I have the pleasure of addressing?"

"Lemanuel Bates and Tobacco Jones."

THE DOUBLE chin creased as Jake Mayor nodded. "Bates and Jones. . . ." he mused. "Somewhere I have heard those names before. Oh, yes, I remember now. Rusty Cameron mentioned you many times. You, Mr. Jones, are the postmaster in Cowtrail, and you, Mr. Bates, are the well-known jurist, Judge Bates?"

Judge Bates nodded. "Rusty is a good friend of ours. So he mentioned us, did he?"

"Yes."

"You know Judge Carmichael, huh?" Bates shot the question suddenly, and his gaze riveted on that of Jake Mayor. But he read exactly nothing in the bland eyes they were devoid of emotion, of life. "Seems as though I heard him mention your name once."

"No," said Jake Mayor. "Why do you ask, Bates?"

"Just a thought," murmured the jurist. "We are thinking of moving into this section, Mayor. The Cowtrail range is gettin' too crowded with farmers and small cowmen. We thought we'd open an account with your bank."

"Sorry," said Mayor, "but the bank is closed. . . . You heard of the robbery, I suppose?" Judge Bates nodded. "This range, too, Judge is well stocked; no more room here. Between my Flying Five outfit and Mike Faber's Nine S Bar—"

"You're puttin' the pinchers on Rusty Cameron's spread," finished the judge.

This time something showed in Jake Mayor's eyes. Anger hung there momentarily, sparkled, then fell back to ashes. "You talk sudden-like, Bates, and you talk on guess work. . . . Rumor has it that Rusty Cameron was hanging out with the gang that robbed my bank, that he had a fallout with them and they went to guns." He added, "If you stay in this town, watch that tongue, Bates."

Tobacco read the signs, and acted. "Let's mosey on, Judge," he said hurriedly. "Glad to have met you, Mayor. Maybe we'll meet again." He was hustling the judge out the door.

"Certainly," said Mayor, and locked the door behind them.

"Dang you," said Tobacco, as they went toward the livery-barn, "ain't you got no sense at all, Judge? You almost got in a fight back yonder."

Judge Bates smiled. "Reckon you said it, pard. But when he accused Rusty of workin' with that gang—"

"Rusty never robbed no bank!"

THEY BUNCHED their shoulders against the rain and pushed into the open door of the livery. There, granted surcease from the rain, Judge Bates turned, glanced toward the bank. Despite the swirling water, he saw that Jake Mayor stood beside a window, watching them.

"Well, we know one thing for sure," the jurist grunted, "an' that is that Jake Mayor is really Henry Talbert."

"For all the good that does us," grunted Tobacco Jones. He spat out into the rain, watched the pelting drops wash the tobacco juice away. The judge tilted his jug and swallowed deeply. "Now what?"

"Wonder where Mike Faber is?"

"Dunno, why?"

The livery barn owner, a wizened, dried up runt, came from the back of the barn, carrying a fork of hay.

The judge asked, "Didn't I just see Mike Faber ride outa the barn?" He hadn't seen Faber since leaving the saloon, but this was one way of getting information.

"You saw right," said the oldster. "He just rid out not more than ten minutes ago. Headed south toward the hills. Hell of a day for a man to ride out in, I say. I'm plumb glad I got an inside job even if I do have to shovel manure."

* * *

They hired a couple of saddle-horses and rigs. The judge's shotgun was in their buckboard along with Tobacco's rifle. They had pulled the rig into the shed back of the barn. The judge pulled back the tarp and looked at their guns, scowling.

"Somebody' tampered with my shotgun."

"You never left that hammer back on cock," said Tobacco.

The judge took the weapon, lowered the hammer. Then he broke it but no shell fell out. Tobacco did the same to his rifle; it, too, was empty.

"Somebody's unloaded our guns," the postmaster said. "Now what if we'd a-walked into somethin' hot with no ca'tridges in our hardware?"

"Somebody," said the judge, "doesn't want us in town."

They sent the holster out after cartridges, reloaded their weapons, and rode into the rain. The drops pounded against their slickers and ran off their southwesters. Tobacco cursed methodically and chewed. Their weapons, safe in saddleholsters, rode dry under their stirrup leathers, and the judge had his jug tied to his strings.

"Now where," asked Tobacco Jones, "are we headin' for, Judge?"

Judge Bates grinned. "We're decoys, Tobacco?"

Tobacco ground off a chew. "Talk sense," he said. "Decoys is what you put out to attract ducks and geese in so you can shoot 'em."

"We're a different kind," said the judge. "We're lamb decoys. We intend to attract a bunch of wolves—or maybe, I oughta said coyoties."

Tobacco gave up. "That jug is gettin' your brains addled, Judge."

WATER swirled and eddied, obscuring the southern hills. The prairie ran across the distance and became part of the dim hills; the hills lifted gradually and became mountains. Evidently the grass had been sparse, because the ground was almost barren. But this rain would bring new life to old grass roots and in a week's time the range would again be green.

Sagebrush and greasewood dotted the rainy surroundings. They forded a small creek, swollen by the rain, and water trickled into the judge's boots. He cursed and took a drink.

Big, slouchy, his huge belly lopping over the horn, he rode slowly, letting his horse pick its slippery way, his jug bouncing against the critter's ribs. Tobacco Jones, his hangdog face solemn with potent thoughts, rode at his partner's side, lanky body lithe against his stirrups.

When they reached the foothills, they had to ride through buckbrush and scrubpine. The rain had subsided slightly. On the summit of a higher hill, Judge Bates turned his horse, squinted through the distance at Hangtown, now hidden by the roll of the land and the rain. Tobacco Jones, chewing rhythmically, followed his fat partner's sharp gaze.

"I cain't see nothin'."

"Neither can I," said the judge, "but I aim to keep on lookin'. We're still decoys, Tobacco."

"For what?" demanded Tobacco Jones, belligerently. Rain trickled down his neck, and it was cold. "Fact is, it's wet enough to attract a few mallards, but I sure don't figger that I look like a wooden red-head floatin'—"

"Yonder," said the judge.

Tobacco stared steadily. "A lone rider," he murmured, "pushin' hard through the rain, his bronc a-lope despite the slippery footin'. . . . That gent's ridin' for a fall under a bronc's hoofs."

"That ain't what's worryin' me," said Judge Bates. "Fact is, I figure maybe it would be better for me an' you—an' for him—if he did get busted up in a fall. Then us two wouldn't have to bust him."

Tobacco Jones scowled. "What're you all talkin' about, Bates?" The judge handed him his fieldglasses and the postmaster focused them, his scowl changing into a look of understanding. He lowered them and said quietly, "Ike, the barman, huh? Circlin' aroun' us, it looks like."

"We're bringin' in the ducks," said the judge, grinning.

"But why?" asked the postmaster. "I don't run it down, judge."

"You will. . . . in time."

THEY TURNED their cayuses again, heading toward the south. Ahead, the mountains lifted, and the judge saw snow on their uppermost heights. The wind was becoming colder, and the rain was changing to snowflakes here in the high altitude.

"Maybe Ike's ridin' out to tell his boss, Mike Faber, we're in this territory," opined Tobacco.

"You're warm, Tobacco."

Tobacco tore off a chew. He masticated it, his eyes seious. Then, "I got it now. . . . We're headin' toward the canyon where Rusty stopped lead. . . . But why—?" He paused, struggled with his tobacco as though he had a grudge against it.

"Mike Faber and Jake Mayor are in cahoots," said the judge.

"You mean, they just act like they're feudin'?"

Judge Bates uncorked his jug, his fingers numb. "Dang this cold weather," he growled. He drank for a long steady pull, and Tobacco Jones had to admire the judge's capacity, even though he himself never touched liquor. "It's the old game, Tobacco. Play both ends against the middle. Rusty owns some good grazing land and water, I understand. . . ."

"But there must be somethin' bigger, Judge. They ain't puttin' up such a ruckus for only a little land."

"There is," the judge agreed.

The solution hit the postmaster suddenly. He turned wide pale eyes on Judge Lemanuel Bates. "Jake Mayor has robbed his own bank, robbed it when that payroll was in

there. Maybe Mike Faber was in cahoots with him on the phony stick-up. But where does Rusty Cameron fit into the picture judge?"

"Rusty rode up a certain canyon," the judge prompted.

"The one we're headin' for," said Tobacco. "You don't suppose them two's got that dinero—that stolen money—hid somewhere in that canyon?"

Judge Bates shrugged heavily. "Maybe so. . . . maybe not."

* * *

By the time they reached the next hogback ridge, they had lost all sight of Ike. Screened by high brush, they sat their wet horses and watched, each pondering with many thoughts, wondering what lay ahead. Then suddenly the judge lifted one enormous hand and his finger jabbed out in pointing.

"There he is."

Already the bartender had circled them, and now he was moving in. Travelling along the base of a gully, they glimpsed him in the space afforded by a deep fissure, then he was gone.

"Ambush," murmured the jurist.

Tobacco Jones' long face, despite the cold wind, was flushed. "Ain't nothin' lower in the book," he numbled, "'cept maybe stealin' your brother's taw marble." He had already dismounted and pulled his rifle out of scabbard, holding it under his slicker to keep the rain from it.

"Nicely said," agreed Judge Bates.

Squatting there, rain runing from their southwesters, flakes of snow whirling around them, they talked it over—and built their plan of action. Then they parted, each moving through the brush.

THE BRUSH was thick here, and for that Judge Lemanuel Bates gave brief thanks. Then other thoughts, more demanding, pushed this thought from him. Gravely, the jurist moved ahead, bulky form raming through brush, shotgun hidden under his slicker front.

He skirted a rimrock ledge; the canyon below lay clothed in a swirl of rain and snow. Cold crept in and stiffened his knuckles as he gripped his scattergun. Below him, there on the canyon floor, was a barren place hidden from the canyon's base, but easily discernible from this high rock. And there on the park's edge was a horse, tied to the circling brush. Ike's horse.

Judge Bates paused, his round face hardening, and he watched the brush across the canyon, and waited. Time slipped by and the cold reached in; he shifted, swore silently, settled back. Then finally he saw Tobacco Jones.

The moment was brief, and the postmaster was in the brush again, hidden. Judge Bates smiled brightly, and went ahead then. His descent down the canyon wall was slow, and through the rain occasionally he caught glimpses of Tobacco Jones. Then he saw Ike.

The bartender wore a dark slicker. He crouched behind a boulder, there on the canyon bed; his rifle lay across the rock, and he had a small piece of canvas over the breech to keep the water out.

Judge Bates came in behind him. The roar of the rain on the rocks, coupled with the surge of the small stream running through the defile, smothered all sounds the jurist made. His shotgun up, he stepped forward.

"Turn around, Ike," he ordered. "And keep your hands off that gun. Put them paws up, fella!"

But Ike didn't drop his gun. He turned hurriedly, and his eyes were red with hate. Judge Bates eared back his hammer. Despite the fact that his scattergun was steady, Ike's bloodshot eyes showed hesitation. He was going to fight it out, the judge saw, and anticipation riffled the jurist's blood.

But Ike never got to shoot. For just then Tobacco Jones stepped from the brush at Ike's right, and Tobacco had his rifle cocked.

"One move with that Winchester, Ike, an' I'm droppin' this hammer!"

Ike turned suddenly, faced Tobacco. Judge Bates saw mingled

emotions fight across the man's scrawny, rugged face. Coldly, the man eyed his opponents, and Judge Bates saw him consider the odds. Evidently they were too much, for the bartender dropped the rifle. It landed with a splash in the mud.

"Don't shoot," he rasped croakingly.

Tobacco came forward, jaw working; he booted the rifle aside. "You two bit badman," he said hotly. "I oughta take that rifle an' ram it down your throat. How come you stage this one-man Buffalo Bill stunt?"

The coldness had left Ike now, his gaunt mouth bore a secretive grin. Judge Bates saw that, and wondered what prompted it—and too late he understood. For, from behind, came a man's cold, authoritive voice.

"Stand where you are, Bates. You two, Jones. Now drop them guns, an' turn aroun' slow!"

Tobacco Jones froze in his tracks. Judge Bates turned slightly, glanced at the man. Then he said, to Tobacco, "Be careful, fellow. . . . Don't take no chances. I got a hunch that Mike Faber aims to kill us. . . ."

"You danged right," grunted Faber. "If you feel lucky, Bates, just drag that scattergun around."

The judge grinned, "But my luck's runnin' sandy. . . ." He hadn't a chance; he knew it. His scattergun fell. Tobacco Jones, cursing slightly, dropped his gun, too.

Now another man, also toting a rifle, came from the brush. Judge Bates' eyes went somber, bleak.

"You too, huh, Jake Mayor?"

Mayor's double chin nodded. "Me, too, Bates," he agreed.

BATES SAW the whole play now. Mayor and Ike had seen them ride out of Hangtown, and had trailed them. Because of the limited vision, they had seen only Ike while Mayor, riding a wider circle than the bartender, had cut deeper into the hills. Joining forces with Mike Faber in the canyon, they had planted a trap—and he and Tobacco had blundered into it.

Now Ike came forward, coppery eyes slitted. "Bates," he growled, "I been waitin' to deliver this!" He swung, the unexpected blow smashing in on the judge's jaw. Despite his solidness, Judge Bates went down.

Moving quickly, Tobacco went forward, his fist swinging. His boney knuckles hit Ike behind the ear, and spilled him. He landed beside Judge Bates. The jurist grunted, heaved his heavy frame on Ike, and they went to work.

They rolled in the mud like two clawing, fighting animals. Now the judge was on top, his fists working; now the top position belonged to Ike, who sent fists into the judge's heavy face. Helpless under the guns of Faber and Mayor, Tobacco Jones had to stand and watch, his homely face constricted.

Never had the postmaster seen the judge in such anger. By superhuman effort, the jurist twisted Ike around, and got on top. Grunting, fighting, he smashed the man's bloody face.

"He'll kill him," said Faber.

"What about it?" grunted Jake Mayor. "If he don't, either me or you prob'ly will some one of these days. . . ."

Faber stepped forward, gun raised. He intended to chop the judge down from behind. Tobacco Jones cursed, started forward. A gun-barrel crashed behind his ear, and dimly he realized that Jake Mayor had slugged him. Through a swirling haze, the postmaster saw Faber's rifle come down, smash across Judge Bates' skull. He saw the judge go limp, his obese body collapsing over Ike, and then the darkness came in and claimed him. . . .

* * *

THROUGH a heavy blanket of pain, Judge Lemanuel Bates came slowly back to reality. Across his aching brain moved the tug, the pull, of his thoughts. Gradually these thoughts solidified; took form, and he wrestled with his errant memory. The darkness slowly broke, and he made out wavering shapes. . .

Gingerly, he sat up. He was on a floor. A huddled shape, a few feet

away, turned out to be Tobacco Jones. He crept to his partner, alarm running across him. But already Tobacco, too, was stirring.

The postmaster sat up, eyes showing alarm. "Where are we, Judge?"

"Near as I can figure, we're in a tool shed. Yonder's the forge there against the far wall. Man, it's cold in here. Wonder where my jug is?"

"T'hades with your jug," snapped Tobacco angrily. "Is that all you think about, Judge? They musta toted us out here."

Judge Bates summoned a smile. "Me, I don't remember. . . . Last I can recollect, me an' this Ike gent was havin' a set-to along the crick. ."

Tobacco told him what had happened. Judge Bates rubbed his head, licked his dry lips, shivered. "Dang, what I wouldn't give for a drink. . . . Wonder where our weapons are?"

"They got them, I reckon."

The judge got gingerly to his feet. His huge knees threatened to buckle as nausea claimed him momentarily. The walls were made of logs but he found a place where the chinking had fallen out and he put his eyes to this crack.

A windswept, snow-dotted mesa lay before him. And yonder, set against a cliff, stood a small log house, with five horses tied to the rail fronting the dwelling. The horses of Mayor, Faber and Ike—and his and Tobacco's.

"Musta took us to the canyon hideout," mused the jurist. He slapped his arms around him vigorously to fight the cold. "How'd you like to be down on the Mex border about now? Bet the sun is bright in ol' Tecate an' the dark eyes are smilin'—" He added, "An' there'd be mescal an' tequilla. . . ."

"But you ain't there," interrupted Tobacco Jones. "We gotta get outa this mess, Judge. What gets me is why didn't they kill us when they had the chance?"

"You got me." Judge Bates studied the dim interior closely. He tried the door—a heavy plank affair—but it was bolted on the outside, and bolted securely. Then he stood back, studying the lock.

Heavy bolts ran through the thick planks, their heads on the inside. Another glance, slow and calculating, studied the inside of the toolshed—and found nothing except the forge at the far end of the building. No windows marred the heavy log walls. He let his gaze rest on the forge.

Ambling forward, he went to it; then, legs wide, he studied it. No ventilating flue ran upward. But the forge was filled with new blacksmith coal. And in it was the metal stirring rod.

JUDGE Bates hefted the steel shaft. "One of us could flatten against the inside wall an' smack 'em when they stuck their heads in—Nope," he shook his head, "there's three of 'em. . . . too many."

"We could burn ourselves out."

"Yeah, an' burn up in the bargain."

Tobacco spat disgustedly. "You got a brain like a gnat, Judge. Heat that poker, burn out the wood around the bolts in the door."

Judge Bates studied him. "That," he said, emphatically, "is the first sensible think I've heard you say since that night you tol' me you wasn't goin' marry the Widder Bluett."

"Leave the Widder outa this!" Tobacco searched his pocket. "Say, they've done taken everythin' away from me. How about you?"

Diligently the judge searched his pockets. . . . and found nothing. He licked his thick lips and wondered where his jug was. Smiling suddenly, he ambled over to where his oilskin southwester lay on the floor. He knelt beside the rain-hat, ran a blunt finger around the inside of the sweatband.

"You gone loco?"

"Reckon not, but one time I was out in the rain an' wanted a dry place to keep my matches. . . . yeah, we're in luck."

"Just one match, though."

"Two," corrected the judge, taking them from under the sweatband.

"Yeah, but one ain't got no head."

They went to the forge. "Now if we had somethin' to start—some chips or shavin's—But we ain't—"

"Our socks," said Tobacco.

"Your socks," said the judge, "would put out a match that got anywhere close to them with the smell—We could rip out the pockets on our slickers."

They did that. Then they buried them under the coal with just a tip showing. The judge held both matches together and lit them. The flame caught, came to life.

He applied the matches to the oilskin. At first, the material just sputtered, and the judge's hopes died as the matches burned low. Finally the oilskin broke into flame.

Tobacco Jones was already turning the bellows. The air fanned across the flame and spread to the coals. Judge Bates let it come to a heat, then stirred the embers with the steel rod.

"Reminds me of when I usta shoe hosses. . . ."

Tobacco Jones stiffened, stopped pumping. "Listen, the door opened. . . to the cabin. . . Somebody's comin'!"

"We got enough fire to hold for a while," the judge said hurriedly. "Don't answer if they call to you. . ." He stuck his head close to the crack. Ike, his head bandaged, one eye black, was coming toward the toolshed, toting his rlfe. He pounded on the door.

"Bates, Jones! Come outa it—"

Silence. He pounded again. Judge Bates saw Jake Mayor come to the door. Ike hollered to the fat man.

"They must be still knocked cold. Should I go in?"

Judge Bates tensed, knuckles white on the poker. Tobacco Jones chewed slowly, his eyes thoughtful. Finally Jake Mayor spoke. "Leave 'em be," he ordered. "They'll come to later. . ."

"We oughta kill 'em," growled Ike, going toward the house.

"Yeah," said Mayor, cynically, "an' get three counties a-chasin' us. . . . There must be a better way than that."

The door closed behind them. Tobacco ran to the forge, turned the handle. The sparks had died low and he blew them into life. Judge Bates rammed the poker home as the postmaster churned.

"Afraid to kill us," the jurist murmured. "Prob'ly in there tankin' up on licker to screw up courage. . . . Man, I wish I had—"

"A drink," finished Tobacco Jones. "That poker's hot, judge."

JUDGE Bates wrapped his slicker around the handle, ran to the door. He jammed the red-hot steel beside a bolt, let it burn through the wood. Smoke rolled out and the stench of burning wood assailed his nostrils. The iron cool, he took it back to the forge.

Time wore on. The small room filled with smoke and the odor of scorched wood. Four bolts held the lock. Two were burned free, then three—finally the last one could be pushed through the burned hole. And the lock swung free outside.

"The house door closed, Tobacco?"

Tobacco looked through the crack. "Yep."

"Let's go," grunted the judge.

Tobacco went first. He scurried like a scared hound into the nearby brush. But Judge Bates, taking more time, set the bolts back in place, ramming the lock back on the door. He had burned his holes through correctly. From the outside, the steel strap covered them—to a casual glance, the lock looked the same as before. Then he was in the brush hunkering beside the postmaster.

"Next, my jug."

"You're wrong," corrected Tobacco. "Guns, fella." He added, "An' they're in the house."

The judge in the lead, they circled through the brush, coming out behind the house. Stiff, lashed by rain, they settled beneath a window, and the judge glanced inside. And what he saw made his face grow stern.

"Sittin' aroun' a pot-bellied heatin' stove," he mumbled. "Warmin' their shins while we freeze outside. Can you hear what they're sayin', Tobacco?"

The postmaster anchored an ear

against the building. "Can't make it out," he said quietly. "Me, I'm cold, hungry and stiff. What's next, Judge?"

"We gotta wait till they get outa the house."

"Yeah, but that may be a long time."

And Tobacco Jones was right. Time ran on, slowly; the rain slashed against them, wetting them to the bone. At last, when dusk coated the wind-rainy hills, the front door opened, and the judge glanced inside again.

"Ike's left," he said.

Tensely, they waited. Then through the rain, came Ike's strident bawl. "They've busted loose, men!"

Boots pounded an exit from the house, and Judge Bates, watching through the window, saw Jake Mayor and Mike Faber run out the door, rifles in hand. Hardly had the door slammed behind them, when the judge had rammed a shoulder into the pane, sending it tinkling to the floor.

He climbed inside, Tobacco following. His shotgun and Tobacco's rifle stood in a corner. His jug was on the table. Despite the necessity for speed, the jurist shook it rapidly, noticed angrily that the trio had lowered it. He tilted it, drank rapidly, grabbed his shotgun.

"Lay that jug down!" snapped the postmaster angrily. "Get to work, Judge!" Tobacco glanced out a front window. Mayor, Faber, and Ike stood in front of the toolshed, a tight, angry knot. Tobacco grinned, fired once.

Hard on the snap of the rifle came the roar of Judge Lemanuel Bates' scattergun. Beebees and lead slapped in the cabin over their heads. Ike hollered, "They're in the house—firin' at us!" and ran into the toolshed with Faber and Mayor tromping on his spurs.

Tobacco lowered his rifle. "How we gonna get them outa there, Judge?"

But Judge Bates wasn't listening; he was drinking. His adams-apple bobbed lustily. Finally he lowered the crock, wiped his lips. He studied the scene practically.

"They can't fire at us," he said, "'cause they ain't no place to stick a rifle out. An' we can't get them unless we set an' starve 'em out. . . ."

"In this rain," growled Tobacco. "No."

The judge drank again. Then he squinted at the lean-to against the toolshed. "Wonder what's in there?"

"Looks like a woodshed."

"I'll watch from here," said the judge. "You head out the back way an' go through the brush an' hunker opposite the door an' watch. When I figure you've reached there, I'll come."

"Okay."

A FEW MINUTES later, carrying his jug, the judge had gone through the brush, and was squatting beside Tobacco Jones, watching the closed door. The harsh voice of Mike Faber sounded from inside.

"Hey, you hombres! We aim to powwow with you!"

"Not with us," answered Judge Bates. "The only way you can talk to us is to pitch your weapons out an' come out with your hands high."

"Shut up, Faber!" ordered Jake Mayor huskily. "The boys'll start driftin' in soon, an' they'll smoke out these foreigners. Jes' set back an' rest. . . ."

Tobacco chewed, spat. "He's right," he opined. "Sooner or later some of their gundogs is bound to ride in. . . . We better get this over with, Judge. But we can't walk in there—they'd be sure to kill us."

"I got an idea."

Tobacco asked, "What—?" but already the judge had left. Circling the toolshed, he came in behind, entered the lean-to. True to Tobacco's prediction, it was a woodshed; huge blocks of pine lay in a heap against the toolshed wall.

Frowning, Judge Bates remembered he had no matches. Forehead grooved, he shook his jug, sadly noted its lowered contents. Thirst struggled with self-preservation. . . . and the latter won.

He knelt, sprinkled whiskey over

the wood, splashed it against the wall. He built a pool of alcohol in a crevice in a block. He placed his shotgun to this, and pulled the trigger. Flame lanced out and the alcohol broke into fire.

He waited until the toolshed wall was on flame, then the heat drove him out. When he hunkered beside Tobacco again, the rear end of the building was high with fire. Tobacco stared.

"You never had no matches," he accused.

"Nope," the judge grunted. "They're comin' out, Jones!"

THE DOOR swung open and smoke bellowed out. Through this, barely discernible due to smoke and dusk, came the big form of Jake Mayor, rifle up. Now Judge Bates, shotgun ready, stepped from the brush.

"Throw that rifle away, Mayor!"

But Mayor was desperate. Before him, loomed a prison term; ahead were only two men—men he hated. He whirled, rifle talking. Haste propelled his bullets, and haste flung them wide.

Judge Bates' shotgun coughed. The leaden slugs, at this close range, tore into Mayor, spilling him in a dark heap. Quickly the judge turned, the roar of Tobacco's rifle prompting him.

Legs wide, smoke spilling upward from his rifle, Tobacco stood there, and chewed methodically. Mike Faber was sitting on the ground, holding a broken shoulder, his rifle lying five feet away. Judge Bates covered him and Ike.

Ike had lost his nerve. Face pale, hands high, he was screaming, over and over, "Don't shoot, don't shoot!"

"All right," said the judge. "Talk." While the bartender told his story, Judge Bates knelt beside Jake Mayor. The man was dead. Judge Bates straightened, asked Ike: "Where's the stolen bank money?"

"In the house—under the floor."

A few minutes later, they rode toward Hangtown, with the dead man scissored over his horse. Mike Faber, shoulder bound, rode slouched, taciturn, silent. Ike, hands bound to his saddlehorn, followed. Tobacco carried the money in a sack on his saddle.

"These gents'll go to jail," he said. "Ike claims Faber shot Rusty."

Weariness was claiming Judge Bates. His mind, running ahead, saw a warm fire, a whiskey toddy, a long chat with Rusty and Margie. "We'll iron that out in court," he said. "I'll see that I get a transfer to this county to preside at their trials. With me on the bench—"

"We won't have a chance," finished Mike Faber.

Tobacco frowned. "One thing that gets me, judge. That fire started like it was full of gasoline. . . . How come?"

"Whiskey," said the judge. "Poured it on the wood."

Tobacco chewed, grinned. "Well, now," he said, "maybe that was what whiskey was intended for—"

Judge Bates drank deeply. "Wrong again," he corrected.

(THE END)

# ACES UP— BULLETS WILD!

## By Brett Austin

*Tim Shane's poker experience came in downright handy when they accused him of murdering his brother.*

YOUNG TIM Shane was playing poker in the Nine Down bar when Chubby Winters came in, his cherubic face flushed. "Your brother Mike's dead, Tim," he said, hurriedly. "The deputy just brought his corpse into town."

Red-haired Tim laid down his hand. "Mike, dead? Say, are you drunk, Chubby? Why I just came from Mike's Quarter Circle X outfit about ten minutes ago an' Mike was plenty alive then."

Chubby shook his head slowly. "He's dead now."

Tim Shane got to his feet. Rawboned, wide-shouldered, he was only nineteen, but a lifetime of roping and branding had hardened him into a man. Without cashing in his chips, he left the saloon.

Bootheels jarring, he went upstreet, heading for the deputy's office. A mixture of thoughts tugged at his brain. He and his older brother had never gotten along. And when grizzly Hank Shane, their father, had died a few months before, the old man had left the Quarter Circle X to steady, easy-going Mike, cutting Tim off with only his saddle and two saddlehorses.

Not that the provisions of the will bothered Tim much. He had seen enough ranching; he'd turned to cards for his living. Old Hank could never understand that. Many violent arguments had flared between Hank and his younger son. But Tim had stuck to gambling, and as a result Mike had inherited the Quarter Circle X.

And now, Mike was dead.

HE LAY on the floor. A limp, big man. Tim Shane knelt beside him, masking his emotions. He looked at the peaceful, tanned face. A few minutes before, that face had shown action, moved under the influence of life. Tim looked up at the deputy.

"What happened, Snyder?"

Snyder, a heavy-set, pot-bellied man, said: "You ought to know, Tim. By the way, you're under arrest. I was jus' goin' down to the Nine Down saloon fer t'arrest you."

Tim studied him. "What's the charge?"

"Murder!"

Tim was silent momentarily. He knew what was ahead. Anger beat at him, and this anger was hot. He held it, though, his gaze traveling around the men encircling his brother's body. Their glances, cold and direct, met his. His eyes rested for a long moment on Rad Hooker.

A stocky, arrogant rancher, Rad Hooker met his gaze levelly. His eyes, green behind drawn brows, held no emotion, no feeling. Now, more than ever, Tim wanted to step forward, smash the heavy-set cowman in the face.

"Okay," he said, "I'll bite. Whose murder?"

"The murder of your brother, Mike Shane," said Snyder.

Tim swore softly. "What makes you think I murdered my only brother?"

Snyder shrugged heavy shoulders. "You just got in town a few minutes ago. Where were you?" The man silenced Tim before he could get out

a syllable. "I know where you was. You were out to Mike's ranch. You got in an argument. You know, an' everybody knows, that you figure Mike did you out of the place. So you killed him."

"And then," said Tim, cynically, "rode openly into town. Do I look like a damned fool, Snyder?"

Snyder studied him. "That's right," he admitted. He looked at Rad Hooker. "You say you saw Tim ridin' away from Mike's ranch, huh?"

"Sure did," growled Rad Hooker. "I was up on the rimrock, huntin' some of my strays. I saw Tim here ride up, saw him leave. Me, I got kinda suspicious, knowin' them two never did get along. I cut across country to get you an', by luck, happened to fin' you ridin' out that way. Well, you know the rest."

Tim nodded, seemingly absent-minded. The whole set-up was clear in his mind, now. Rad Hooker had no strays on the rimrock. He'd been hiding up there watching the Quarter Circle X ranch house. He'd seen Tim arrive, leave, then he'd slipped down and murdered Mike.

Hooker had plenty of reasons to get Mike out of the way, chief of these being that Mike controlled most of the good grass and water on this range. With Mike out of the road, the ranch would fall to Tim, and Hooker probably figured that Tim would sell out to him for a few cents on the dollar just to get rid of the Quarter Circle X.

Rad Hooker, and Mike had been deadly enemies; any number of times they had met, clashed, and fought it out. And each time red-headed Mike, by sheer strength and guts, had fist-whipped the bigger Hooker, made him crawl in the dust and eat crow. Hooker was the type who'd never forget. . . or forgive.

"You killed him, Hooker," accused Tim.

HOOKER MOVED forward. "I'll —I'll bust you in two, Tim Shane!" Three men, including the deputy, moved in, held the rancher back. Rad Hooker found his composure. The deputy mopped his forehead.

"What'd you mean?" the lawman demanded.

"When I climbed the ridge, comin' into town, I seen a rider come off the rimrock, Snyder. I recognized him as Hooker. He killed Mike an' then concocted this cock-an' bull story."

Rad Hooker said, smiling, "Sure, I went to the house. I've already told Snyder that. You talk big, Tim Shane, but trouble is you ain't got no proof to back up your talk. He's kinda interestin', huh, men?"

A man grumbled, "We should lynch a gent that'd murder his brother!"

Tim recognized the speaker as a Hooker rider. Probably spotted in the crowd to stir up trouble. He looked at Snyder.

"Where was the body when you found it?"

"On the kitchen floor. Why?"

Tim scowled. "Dressed?"

"Sure. Why ask?"

"When I was out there Mike was in bed. Somethin' he'd ate wasn't settin' so good in his belly. He wanted me to buy him some medicine in town." Tim took a small bottle out of his shirtpocket. "Here it is. I was just goin' take it out to him, too."

Snyder fingered the bottle, handed it back to Tim. "But he was dressed when me an' Rad Hooker found him. Ain't that so, Rad?"

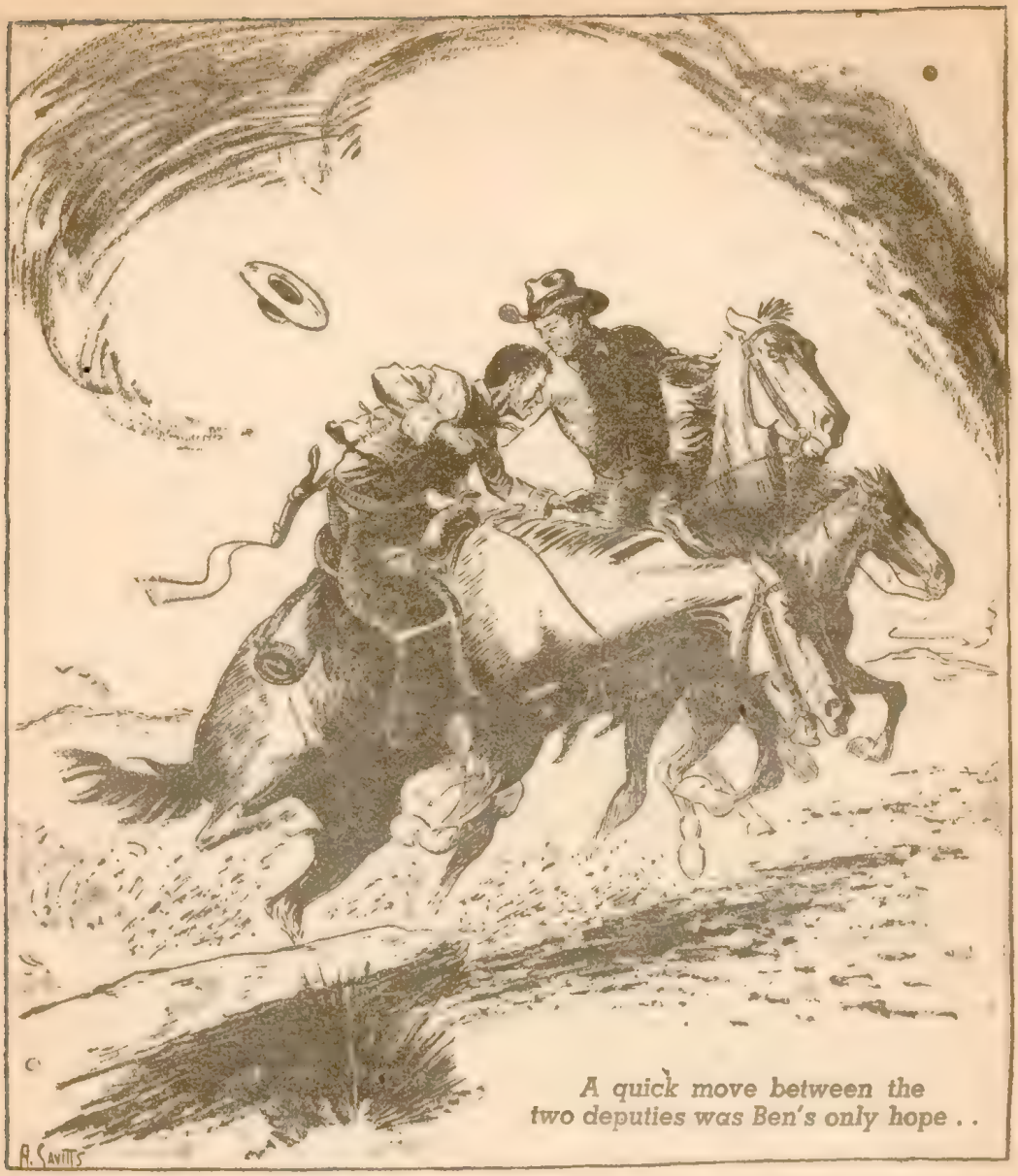
Hooker grunted, "Sure is." He studied Tim sharply, his eyes keen. "What kind of a game you tryin' to play, Tim Shane?"

"Somebody sneaked into the house an' shot Mike," said Tim. "Look at that bullet placed right through his heart. When a bullet hits a man there, it breaks a big artery. Blood'll spurt out of him quite a distance. I was readin' about it in a book once in school. Chances are that the blood just shot out and maybe it hit the shirt of the man that shot him." He turned suddenly on Rad Hooker. "You see any blood on me, Hooker?"

Hooker said, slowly, "No."

Tim Shane moved closer, hand on gun. "That's blood on your shirt there, ain't it, Hooker?"

(Continued On Page 96)



*A quick move between the two deputies was Ben's only hope . .*

# MURDER AIN'T POLITE

## By Joe Austell Small

*(Author of "Killers Are Curious," "Dig Swamp Graves Shallow," etc.)*

**If Ben Gipson's hunch didn't work out, it would be his last one, because the sheriff didn't aim to be polite to a cold-blooded murderer!**

BEN GIPSON jerked straight in his saddle. He looked into the hard blue eyes of Sheriff Wade Stokes. He repeated that word the sheriff had said with an incredu-

lous tone to his voice. It was then that Ben realized there are words a man never fully realizes the meaning of until they are associated with him. And *murder* damned sure was one of them. . .

"But, Wade," the young waddie said. "I didn't kill old Dave Campbell. He'd a'been the last man—"

"Yeah, I know—you're courtin' his daughter. But how're you gonna explain your huntin' knife buried hilt deep in old Dave's back?"

"Couldn't a'been my knife, Sheriff—I got it right here!" There was a surge of relief in the waddie's voice. Ben's hand moved toward his belt. The two deputies raised ready carbines threateningly. "Everybody knows I use a Marble's long blade. Got my initials on the hilt."

Ben Gipson's hand stopped suddenly; and a lone forefinger dabbed hopelessly at the yawning emptiness in the worn sheath. There was suddenly an iceberg in the bottom of Ben Gipson's stomach. A shivering chill spidered up and down his spine. The waddie's throat muscles contracted as though a hemp rope was drawing them tight. He had been pretty drunk at the shindig all right. And he never remembered anything that happened when he was like that.

"It's empty, eh!" The sheriff's words were more in the form of a statement than a question.

"Yeah," the waddie answered, "it's empty."

BEN GIPSON reckoned about now was the right time to bow out of that particular picture. If he were guilty, he ought to hang for it all right—but, if he wasn't, the waddie had just as soon live on a while longer. But a man couldn't do much investigating behind bars.

Old Wade was a good sheriff, but he wouldn't press a case like that too far. It looked like just one answer, and, as far as Wade Stokes was concerned, he already had it. The fact that Ben and the murdered Dave Campbell had squabbled continually since the waddie started tying his mount to the Slash C hitchrail, come sundown on Saturday nights, wouldn't help his case a whole lot, Ben thought. Old Dave hadn't cottoned to the idea of anybody marrying his daughter.

Right now would be a good time to pull a fade-out on the sheriff and his two deputies all right, but Ben Gipson was wondering how in hell a man was going to fade with two carbines and a long nosed .45 pointing at his belly!

It was the suddenness that did it, Ben reckoned. The two deputies spurred their mounts over to gather in his hardware. Ben slumped forward in seeming resignation and the lawmen relaxed. Then the waddie's little palomino grunted in surprised pain and lunged forward.

He was in between the two horsemen, both arms thrown out and dragging them off their mounts before the startled lawmen knew what had happened. The sheriff jerked erect, threw up his .45 for a chance shot, but Ben didn't aim to give the old lawman that chance. He grabbed one of the deputies around a skinny neck, dragged him off his mount, and held the man in between him and the sheriff. Gipson shoved the deputy at Wade Stokes and grabbed the old lawman's gun arm. With a sharp pull he jerked the old man out of his saddle.

Then Ben Gipson rode hell for leather. He reached the nearby creek before that first bullet spanged against a polished granite rock so close it made his skin bumpy as a shriveled up lemon. Others followed. They didn't matter now though. You couldn't shoot straight through a screen of bushes even with a carbine.

If the little horse would stay on his feet now, Ben Gipson reckoned he'd won that first scrape with that gallows rope. But, if he knew Sheriff Wade Stokes, and the waddie knew damned well that he did, this was just barely the beginning. Ben Gipson's knife had been pulled from the back of a well-liked Windalong Valley rancher. And in this particular valley, whether a man had been drunk or sober when he did it, a rope around the neck was the penalty for such an act. And Sheriff Wade

Stokes meant to see that it got there. . .

MAKING a sharp left hand turn at a tiny running tributary to the creek, Ben looked back over his shoulder. Nothing in sight yet. By the time those sleuth-hounds could catch their horses and follow, the running water would fill in those sand cups his horse's hoofs made in the soft creek bottom. He followed the tiny branch for a short distance, then pulled his mount to the right bank on a shelf of shallow rock. If old Wade could track him out of that set-up, he'd have to smell as well as see!

A thirty minute ride and Ben was on Slash C range. He proceeded with caution. The sheriff had probably already spread word throughout the valley. When that old sleuth-hound went after a man, he left no bets unbet.

Right now, Ben thought, he'd rather take his chances with the old sheriff on another break-away than to face Marietta Campbell. If she believed he was really responsible for the death of old Dave Campbell, the girl's eyes wouldn't be pretty to see when she stood looking up at him. But before he did anything else, Ben had to see Marietta Campbell.

Things were mighty quiet there at the old Slash C headquarters. Ben left his horse in a manzanita thicket back of the house and crept up behind the big, rambling barn. Leaves on the old cottonwood rustled dryly. The old windmill creaked. A calf bawled in the cowpen.

He hadn't seen them at first because of the thick stand of honeysuckle running along the backyard fence. Ran Hutson stood there, hat in his hands, talking with his head down. Marietta had one foot on the back door steps, as if she were about to enter the house when Ran rode up and dismounted. The cowman would probably be there an hour unless the girl ran him off. The waddie couldn't wait that long.

Ben Gipson walked up. There was a .44 in his right fist. The muzzle pointed carelessly at Ran Hutson.

"Sorry to break in this way, but I'm in sort of a hurry."

There was a startled expression on Ran's face. The girl looked at Ben dully. She didn't speak.

"Marietta, I'm sorry about—I just wanted you to know that I—"

"Ran told me all the details." The girl's voice was hard. "I'd hoped the part about you was a mistake."

"I hope it is too, Marietta. You know the way I feel—"

"Sure," the girl's eyes blazed. "You were in love with me—love me, kill my father!" There was harsh irony in her voice now. "I'd hoped you would at least *know* whether you did it or not. Oh, Ben—how could you do a thing like that!" The girl broke then. She was sobbing softly as the back door slammed behind her.

"Thank'ye for telling her all about it." Ben eyed Ran Hutson coldly. "Maybe I can do something nice for you sometime!"

"You'll be doing something nice for the whole valley when you start kicking the air at the end of a gallows rope!"

Deep anger flushed the cowboy's cheeks a dark red. "I like something more solid to kick on than air," he stepped forward quickly and grabbed the cowman's gun. In another moment Ran Hutson cried out in pain and anger.

* * *

BEN GIPSON smiled slightly as he plodded along the dusty trail. He'd always figured he could kick a man down if he got a good swing from behind. Ben guessed a man oughtn't to flare up like a kid over things like that, but he could swing at the end of a rope now a heap more satisfied—if it came to that of course. Just seeing that silly, pained expression on Ran Hutson's face and the man holding the seat of his pants was worth a whole lot. It would help ease the pain of that long stretch. He'd die a heap more satisfied.

The sheriff would expect him to hit for Old Mexico, so he'd ride in the opposite direction—north, up Windalong Valley. He'd lie out a few

days to give the searching parties time to boil down a little and then do some quiet investigating on his own. They couldn't trail him from the Slash C ranch house. He'd ridden away to the south and then circled north. The ground was hard. He hzdn't left much sign. He sort of wished Ran Hutson would tackle the task of finding him alone.

As the waddie rode, his mind worked rapidly. It sure looked like his tail was in a crack all right. Old Dave Campbell wasn't known to have an enemy in the Valley. He was tough and a squareshooter. People let him alone. Back in the old days, folks said a man could back old Dave against a nest of sidewinders, stake each rattler to one bite before Dave got started, and still come out winner. A man like that was let alone and respected in a place like Windalong Valley.

On the other hand, Ben Gipson was working for old Hank Gillis of the Wagon Tongue spread. He didn't own a foot of land, but he did have a claim on old Dave Campbell's gal. That's what made the difference in this present mix-up. It looked like old Dave never was going to get reconciled to Ben, or anybody else, grabbing off his only child. That's why he and the waddie had squabbled pretty harsh of late.

NOW, TO the folks of Windalong Valley, it might look right logical for a boy like Ben to figure it good business if he could get rid of old Dave. Nothing would stand in the way of his marrying the girl then and coming into one of the best little ranches in the valley. Maybe he didn't have enough nerve to do it while he was sober, but on that night of the shindig—he'd carried out his plans. The waddie had been too drunk to cover up such minor little details as leaving his own knife in old Dave's back, however.

Yep, people were mighty apt to think along these lines all right. What bothered Ben most right now though was not so much what people thought, but the fact that he himself didn't know what to think. He'd got woozy awfully fast last night. A man ought not to get that way. Ben hadn't since he was a youngster. He hadn't aimed to last night either.

The waddie sat loosely in his saddle, shifting his shoulder blades as the sun burned through his shirt. The little palomino was sweating peartly. The smell of wet horse hair and saddle leather filled the languid air. He'd be up in the north end of the valley and at the far side of Ran Hutson's Rafter O in another hour. He'd hide out then, and the little horse could get some much needed rest.

* * *

Ben heard that upper Windalong Valley was wild, but he hadn't guessed that it would look plumb uncivilized. A man could get lost in that maze of gulches, funnel shaped hills and thick mesquite brush. Although the grazing wasn't so good, there were plenty of cattle in here—fat, sleek stock. The waddie glanced at them idly as he rode along. They were all fresh branded. Funny thing. The old stuff as well as the young—all with new burns. Looked strange, by gosh. A rancher hardly ever—

Ben Gipson pulled his jaded horse short. Suspicion burned its way through his brain. He dabbed a rope on one of the older critters. The little palomino braced himself against the rope pull as Ben quit the saddle. He examined the brand hurriedly.

The burn was a blamed fuzzy looking Rafter O brand. The best Ben could figure out, those cattle started out with a Slash C brand, and the rest of the marking that made them Ran Hutson's cattle looked like pretty poor hair branding.

For a moment Ben Gipson stood there. His eyes were still, but his mind worked fast. A sort of uncontrollable drumming pounded at his ear drums. The critter standing there before him wore a fuzzy Rafter O brand on the *outside* all right, but an original eighteen square inches of hide, laid down before a campfire, would show plain enough what she wore on the *inside*.

Ben killed the cow quickly. If his

hunch was wrong, that critter would cost him a whole month's wages. If he was right, the scraggly old cow might save his neck. . .

With a dull pocket knife, he worked feverishly. The thick hide came away slowly, but the story was there when he finally laid it back. The inside markings were plain enough to convict any man. The waddie's heart stood still for a moment. Then the water in his veins turned back to blood. It was good to have hope again.

He covered the carcass with brush. He aimed to bring somebody back and show them that cow, and he wanted the critter to be there when he got back. The ragged patch of hide he'd cut off the cow would jigsaw back perfectly. A changed brand —with the critter carrying it found on Ran Hutson's ranch! Undoubtedly the rest of those freshly branded cattle had been changed from Slash C to Rafter O. Old Dave Campbell's brand was the only one in the valley that could be changed to Ran Hutson's Rafter O. Ran evidently had been working on old Dave's beef pretty heavily of late.

"Pal, old boy," the waddie addressed his mount, "you are tired, and I'm tired—mighty. But we got some work to do. We can't clear up a murder with this patch of cowhide I got here, but we can damned sure start somebody thinking! We're goin' back. . . "

HALFWAY across the Rafter O, Ben reined in his mount sharply. Two riders were coming through the brush at a long fox-trot.

"—but I guess he knows what he's doin'." Ben caught the tail end of a two-way conversation. "We'll have a clean sweep all right if he can get the posse trailin' south after that Gipson chump. If no trouble pops up at the North Pass, we'll have easy goin'."

The riders passed on, their voices trailing off into inaudible mumblings.

A smile pulled back the corners of Ben Gipson's lips. It was all piecing out now. The edges were still a little ragged, but the waddie knew one thing—Ran Hutson was one of the slickest dealers in cattle rustling he had run across, and there'd been plenty of it in the west those last few years.

There were six ranches in Windalong Valley. They were small as ranches go, but the lush valley grass supported two cattle on a strip of land that ordinarily would support only one. They were a tight little association—those six ranchers.

Now, if old Dave Campbell had strongly suspected Ran Hutson of rustling his cattle, has worked up a little proof—Ran might figure that it would be a good thing to get old Dave out of the way. That would leave old Dave's daughter running the place. If Ran's manners were good enough, he might annex the daughter and the whole Slash C with one preacher. The Slash C and Rafter O combined would make a mighty nice spread—twice as big, nearbout, as any other ranch in the valley.

The Rafter O ramrod would have a perfect chump to lay the murder on. And what could have been a better time than the night of that annual Windalong Valley Ranchers' Stag Shindig to pull the job? Everybody would meet at Sam Dotson's Double D this year, all leave together, then separate and each ride to his own ranch. There'd be some drinking. It would be a good time to—by golly, that last drink Ben took had tasted damned funny! He hadn't made it home, but had woke up next morning on the trail, his horse grazing nearby. The sheriff and his deputies had rode up then.

Ran Hutson could have slipped something in his drink just as they were about to leave, later taken his knife and. . .

"Pearten up, old boy!" There was a trace of excitement in the waddie's voice. "The soup's beginnin' t' simmer a little!"

BEN CROSSED the north-east corner of Slash C range and into Bar S country. He'd worked for old Walt Sorelson one time; had hazed a hundred sleepers down the west slope of the valley after a two-

day pick up. The waddie looked uneasily at a dropping sun. He had a right smart to do before the last rays of that sun burned out in the west. It was the first time in the waddie's life that he'd ever staked his neck on a hunch. And, the way Ben Gipson looked at it, if that hunch didn't work out right, it would be the last time. . .

* * *

It was risky, slipping up to the Wagon Tongue headquarters that way. But the posse would more than apt be looking for him elsewhere—thinking that home would be the last place he'd be. The ranch was deserted save for the colored cook.

"Mistuh Ben!" the darky exclaimed. "Lawd, man—I thot you's out ob de country by now! Dey looking fo' you everywhere, suh!" The old fellow glanced out of the window, and a lower tone crept into his voice. "Ol' Sheriff got every rancher an all their help in the valley lookin' fo' you! Everybody's powerful mad about dat killin' of po' ol' Mistah Campbell. You didn't do it now, didja, suh?"

"Where are they huntin', Smut?" the waddie asked.

"All ovah the south end of the valley, suh!" The darky was concerned. "Nearly everybody in the whul valley out, suh! You bettah be kerful!"

"Smut, you're a life saver!" The waddie smiled. "Throw me out some grub right quick and go saddle me a fresh horse while I eat!"

After wolfing down enough food to give him strength for the ordeal ahead, Ben rode cautiously away from the Bar S on a new horse. "Now begins," he mumbled to himself with a smile "one of the strangest criminal hunts ever staged—the criminal huntin' the hunters!"

There would be several different posses Ben knew. He was making good time. Things would just about run according to schedule if there were no hitch-ups.

THE WADDIE rode out on a low bluff, overlooking the south end of Windalong Valley. The great lowlands were bathed in that rich golden light that comes just before the shadows. Greens seemed greener, yellow yellower. To Ben Gipson the long stretches of lush mesquite grass, the gentle slopes, and the timbered valley proper looked like about the closest thing to paradise he'd ever seen. Maybe it was because he wasn't so sure he'd be able to see it at all after the stunt he was about to pull. . .

He saw them then—a small party of ranchmen and their ranch hands riding through a small clearing. The waddie acted instantly. He might give up the whole idea if he gave himself much time to think it over.

The waddie headed directly into the searching party, gave them time to see him and pull up their horses, then brought his mount to a sudden stop, wheeled and took off at right angles, seemingly as if he had just spotted them. The posse followed with a shout. He headed south after making a wide arc.

The waddie was smiling grimly. A posse of irate ranchers on his tail, more ahead—it looked like he was riding hell bent for the gallows! Attracted by the shooting, another small group fed into the first posse as Ben swung to within three hundred yards of them. More men joined the irate ranchers as the wild chase proceeded through the mesquites.

A big yellow moon lifted its round head over the horizon. Ben looked at it and smiled with satisfaction. So far everything was working according to schedule. It would be so easy to trip up though. . .

Making a wide swing across the south end of Windalong Valley, the waddie headed due north. This move must have given the pursuing ranchmen a profound shock. They had expected the fugitive to head straight for the Mexican border. They were pressing him hard now. Ben didn't like that. He might arrive at his destination too soon. That "rounding up the hunters" process had taken less time than he had figured.

Three times the waddie hid out and delayed the chase. Then as the moon lifted its head high above the valley,

Ben Gipson smiled grimly. This last dash would be the sugar game. It would prove whether or not that neck of his remained its present length.

As the waddie rode, he began to grow uneasy. Ben peared ahead, lips tight. They were half way up the valley now, still going north. His mount was blowing hard. This bay he was riding couldn't stand up to punishment like his little palomino. The posse was gaining again.

* * *

Cold fear spidered up Ben Gipson's spine when he made the last great swing in that winding valley. Two more miles and he would be at the north-east pass. It looked like maybe this time his hunch—

Then he saw it. A brown blanket rolled up over the horizon, hanging listlessly in the lifeless air. Dust! Good, clean, dirt-dust! Maybe there was some justice in the world again! Ben Gipson had just about decided the devil was running things in Windalong Valley. . .

A HERD OF fast moving cattle was ahead of that dust cloud. The posse was slowly closing the space between them and the waddie's jaded bay. Those bullets were a little too close now for deep, easy breathing!

They were bearing down on the herd now. Ben could see excited riders hurrying the cattle on. Caught in the act, the rustlers chose to fight it out. A hail of lead swept up the valley.

The posse held their fire for a moment. Ben could imagine the surprise on their faces. But they were hardened cattlemen; they asked no questions. A group of apparently hostile men was shooting at them. The posse answered bullets with bullets.

Caught in the narrow north neck of Windalong Valley, the rustlers had but two means of escape—forward and to the rear. That back section was growing hotter every minute, so the excited cattle thieves began a frenzied retreat through the very ranks of the moving herd, shooting back over their shoulders.

It was a mistake of course. Wild shooting stampeded the herd. Dust fogged high. The cattle rushed wildly forward, their intended masters trapped securely in the rushing mass of beef on the prod.

When the herd slowed down, stopped, and finally started milling in a sort of natural corral at the head of Windalong Valley, the rustlers began working their way out. It had been too much for them. Caught in a net of their own spreading, the men were bruised, dust choked, and scared.

"There's Ran Hutson!" someone exclaimed. "I thought he was with us on this search for Gipson!"

"He was—but he came back for more important business!" A voice came from behind the posse. The men turned quickly. They stared, jaws sagging, at Ben Gipson. Gun muzzles were moved over hurriedly to cover him.

"A rustler and a murderer! We got'tum both at one time! Let's string 'um up, boys!"

The men looked like maybe that wouldn't be a bad idea.

"Boys, I didn't kill old Dave Campbell," Ben looked straight into the eyes of Sheriff Wade Stokes. The old lawman was peering at him intently.

"String 'em up!" an impatient cattleman yelled.

"Yeah, let's get it over with!" another echoed his sentiments.

"Hold on, boys!" the old sheriff raised a weather-cracked hand. "If Ben Gipson here hadn't lead us to them, the whul valley'd been swept clean by our friend Hutson and his men. Let Ben talk."

"By grab, he did lead us here all right!" one of the men reasoned.

Ben continued, "Old Dave Campbell got some pretty sure proof that Ran Hutson was stealin' his cattle." Ben handed the Sheriff that jig-saw patch of fresh cowhide. "I took this off a cow on Ran Hutson's ranch this evenin'. Look it over."

"Ran killed the old man to keep him quiet. At the Cattleman's Shindig he doped my last drink, followed

me out and got my knife when I fell off my horse on the way home. He caught up with old Dave then and stuck him in the back. Me an' old Dave had been arguin' some over Marietta, and Ran figured that my knife in the old man's back would cinch the deal. It would hush old Dave before he could accuse his neighbor of rustling. Ran would get the gal and the ranch too. I'd get my throat stretched. That'd relieve Ran of his competition.

"Tonight," the waddie continued, "Ran figured to make a clean sweep. It would be the chance of a lifetime. He got you boys all down on the south end searchin' for me and then he snook back. He had men stationed on each ranch. They hazed the smaller herds together into what you see is the finest stock in the valley. They were going to shoot them out the North-east Pass, over fifteen miles of hard, rocky soil to Dry Lizard Gulch and straight south then into Mexico."

"You'll have a hard time, cowboy," Ran Hutson spoke up, "proving that I killed Dave Campbell!"

"Maybe not," there was confidence in Ben Gipson's voice. Ran looked at him sharply. "I notice you lost a button off the cuff of your jacket there."

The big man glanced down quickly, fear in his eyes. "If I could show you one to match, found at the scene of the murder—," Ben reached inside a shirt pocket.

"Hold it, Gipson!" The big man jumped aside warily. Ben now was between Ran Hutson and the posse. The big man had a gun in his hand. "You're going to back off with me, Gipson." There was cold threat in his voice. The man would stop at nothing now. "They'll have to kill both of us if they stop me!"

Ben was perhaps five feet from the big man and his level gun. A jump—nog straight at him—off to the left side—would put the waddie close. He jumped. Ran Hutson's gun roared under Ben's arm. He was surprised not to feel the bullet. The waddie looped his right fist over as he jumped again. It landed when he landed. It took the big man too high—up on the cheekbone—but it rocked him.

The waddie didn't know what had happened to Ran's gun. He didn't stop to look for it. He was busy, crowding him back, not letting the big bull of a man set himself, staying close, driving at him with both hands.

The waddie supposed that Ran Hutson hit him plenty as he hammered the big man back. He must have. But he didn't feel anything.

Ran Hutson fell backward. The waddie got his left arm around the big man's body, holding him secure. And then Ben began to throw his right fist into him, hard. The waddie liked that. Ran Hutson's belly was flabby, and it got softer every time he hit it. He hit it often.

"Let'um go!" he heard the sheriff bellow as someone stepped in to intervene. "The boy's got a right to a few belly punches after nearly losing

his neck in as neat a frame job as has ever been pulled in this here valley!"

THE WADDIE came up then, pulled Ran Hutson to his feet. He took two punches in the face. They were weak though. That belly-bouncing he'd just given the big man had taken the pep out of the big ape's muscles. He hit Ran Hutson hard then over the right ear. The big man went down. He tried to get up. His eyes were open, his mind seemed alive, but those big hairy arms and legs wouldn't lift him from the ground.

Ben Gipson was pretty bloody. He'd taken more punishment in that fight than he thought. When a man was as bent on elliminating something as he was, such things as getting beat up didn't register very hard.

He saw Marietta then. She was listening to the sheriff talk. It made the waddie feel good. He'd always wanted to whip a bully in front of his girl. Even when he was a kid he'd dreamed about doing it. He was beat to a pulp himself, the waddie began to realize, but he'd whupped Ran Hutson before every rancher in the valley, and most important, before Marietta Campbell.

Ben Gipson smiled. He turned around to walk toward his girl. The waddie's knees buckled. He wilted to the ground in slow motion. . .

* * *

Sheriff Wade Stokes, Marietta, and Ben Gipson sat on the front porch of the Slash C ranchhouse. It was only two hours ago that he had fought Ran Hutson to the ground. It seemed months. He liked the tender care the girl had given his battered face. Maybe he'd be a long time mending up to par again. Ben looked at the girl. There was a warmness in her eyes. It made that danged lizard start running up his back again.

"Ben," the sheriff was smoking his blackened cob and looking out across the moonlit richness of Windalong Valley. "I had a man watching the scene of that killin' for hours after we found old Dave's body. Thought maybe we'd see who showed up. Wasn't a danged soul came nowhere about. You shore stuck your neck out about that button."

"Yeah, I did," Ben admitted.

"Bet you didn't even have a button."

"Naw, I didn't," the waddie confessed.

"You'd been in one heck of a fine shape if Hutson had waited and called your hand on it," old Wade suggested.

"Shore would," Ben agreed. "But dammit, man, I had to do something!"

Old Wade Stokes held back his head and laughed. "And I guess you got to do something else 'long about now too. I'll be moseyin' on down the road. You're a danged lucky cowpoke!" the sheriff smiled, glancing at Marietta

* * *

After the old lawman had gone, the girl turned to Ben Gipson. "Somehow, all along, I never could bring myself to believe completely that you did it," she said. There was a soft light in the girl's eyes now.

"My pa told me once," the waddie said slowly, "that a man never fully realizes the meanin' of some words until he's accused of 'em. Murder's sure one! My pa swore he'd raise me up right. He said keep out of these blasted shootin' and cuttin' scrapes. He said it warn't a polite way to treat a man's neighbors! Pa'as kinda funny about expressin' things but they made sense."

"Did your pa," the girl said, smiling slowly, "ever say how to treat your womenfolk neighbors?" Her long hair glistened in the yellow moonlight. The girl's eyes were smiling at him now.

"Come to think of it, don't believe he did." Ben Gipson hitched his chair over a little closer to the girl's battered old rocker. "Guess maybe he figured a man ought to handle things like that without trainin'!"

"He ought," the girl said solemnly. Ben Gipson did.

(THE END)

# Shorthorn Deputy

## By Gunnison Steele

**(Author of "Cold Blizzard—Hot Lead")**

*Young "Paint" McCabe Wanted to Be a Deputy Somethin' Fierce, and . . .*

I'D NEVER seen anybody who wanted anything as bad as "Paint" McCabe wanted to be a lawman. He was a tow-headed, freckled youngster, not over seventeen, and he was a sort of maverick about town. When he wasn't doing odd jobs, he hung about my office, pestering me to make him a deputy.

I didn't have the heart to tell the button he just plain didn't have the savvy. He had a lot of queer ideas about how to capture criminals. Like the time this gent wearin' a deputy U. S. Marshal's badge fogged into town on a spent bronc. . .

He was a big, hook-nosed, black-bearded hombre. When he saw the sign over my office, he swerved his bronc in to the rack out front, dismounted and came inside. He looked at me, toastin' my shanks th re before the warm stove, and he said:

"I'm lookin' for the county sheriff."

"Me," I said. "Sam Littlejohn."

He unbuttoned his sheepskin coat and showed me a badge.

"I'm Nick Peel," he said, speakin' fast. "I'm a deputy U. S. Marshal, and I've been trailin' 'Left-Hand' Hogan and his gang for the last couple of weeks. They stuck-up a train up close to Red Butte a month ago, killin' a couple of guards. Mebby you heard about it?"

I certainly had heard about it. Furthermore, I'd got word that this Left-Hand Hogan—so called because he was a left-handed gun-slinger, and greased lightnin'—had headed south toward my neck of the woods after the robbery. I'd been on the look-out for them. Left-Hand Hogan, according to the reward flyer I had in a desk drawer, was dangerous as a mad rattler that'd drunk a quart of red-eye spiked with gila monster poison.

I got up and shook hands with this Nick Peel. "I got word Hogan's bunch was headed this way. You got any idea where they are?"

"I sure have," he says. "I caught up with 'em two days ago over at Rock Ferry. They fought their way clear, but I took up their trail again, along with a couple of deputies from the Ferry. We had fast horses, and we caught up with 'em ag'in late yesterday up at the head of a place the deputies called Turkey Canyon."

"I know where it is," I told him. "At the canyon head's an old stone corral which used to be a wild horse trap. It's a natural fort. Is that where they holed up?"

"That's right. We couldn't get at them—there were only three of us—but they couldn't get out without bein' cut down. So it was a stand-off. I left my two deputies there to keep them holed up, and headed here for help to smoke them out. Can you round up a posse?"

I TOLD HIM I could. "I sure don't want this Left-Hand Hogan and his gang of hellions loose in my county. I can have a bunch ready to ride in an hour."

The door opened just then and Paint McCabe came into the office. He had a sack of striped stick candy in his hand. If there was anything the kid liked better than stick candy I'd never seen it. He stopped short, gnawing on a stick of candy and looking at Nick Peel suspiciously. The button suspected every stranger he saw of being an outlaw.

"Kid, this here's Nick Peel, a deputy U. S. Marshal," I said. "He's got Left-Hand Hogan and his bunch cor-

nered up at the old stone corral in Turkey Canyon. I want you to go out and round up a big bunch of men, all you can find."

"Do I ride with the posse?" he asked.

"Sure—sure," I agreed. "Only hurry!"

"You ought to swear me in," the kid insisted. He took a stick of candy from the sack and tossed it at Nick Peel. "Have a stick of candy, Marshal. It's powerful good."

Nick Peel caught the candy, then tossed it impatiently onto the desk. "Time's precious, sheriff. That gang might rush my two men at any time, so I won't wait for the posse. I aim to get back out there quick as I can."

I said, "We'll hit Turkey Canyon in no time," and headed into the next room to get my Winchester.

Through the doorway, I saw Nick Peel turn and start for the street door. And I saw Paint McCabe jump for him head-first, like he was diving into a river. I saw Nick Peel whirl, and snatch up under his coat for his six-shooter.

But Paint hit him just about then, in the stomach, and I heard the breath *whoosh-h!* out of the big hombre as he slammed against the floor. Then the kid swarmed over him like a wildcat, using his fists and head and feet to work Nick Peel over.

I ran back into the room. "You crazy, jug-headed ijiit!" I yelled. "You'll get twenty years in the pen for assaultin' a U. S. Marshal!" And I grabbed him by the neck and tried to pull him loose.

But he clung to Nick Peel like a burr, and I never saw a man get a worse beating in less time than that big hombre got. And finally, when Paint McCabe got up, Nick Peel didn't. He lay there, moanin' and trying to find out what'd hit him. The kid had his gun.

"Younker," I said, "I don't know why you done it, but you've probably got us both into a mess of trouble. Hell's hog-pen! Didn't you hear me say that was Nick Peel, a U. S. Marshal?"

"His name ain't Nick Peel, and he ain't a marshal."

"I reckon he's Left-Hand Hogan his-self, then?" I hollered.

"He sure is," the kid says calmly. "The reward flyer says Left-Hand Hogan's hair and beard are red. Well, when I got my first look at that hombre's shrubbery, it looked phony, like it'd been dyed black—"

Just then the gent who'd called himself Nick Peel, sat up, and he started yowlin' like a turpentined cat. He called Paint McCabe a lot of names.

"How'd you figure out I was Left-Hand Hogan?" he snarled.

I locked him in a cell, and pretty soon I had the whole story. Left-Hand Hogan, masquerading as a U. S. Marshal, had figured to empty the town by luring most of the men out on a fake man-hunt and then ride in with his own gang and clean everything out down to the floor. It'd have worked, too, if it hadn't been for Paint McCabe.

"About that dyed hair and whiskers," I said, awhile later in my office. "That was pretty slim evidence, considerin' Hogan had switched his gun to his right side to avoid suspicion."

Paint McCabe grinned.

"That's just it. I wasn't sure about the whiskers—but when I tossed him that stick of candy, right quick, before he had time to think, he caught it with his *left* hand. Then I knew that right-handed gun was a fake, and I jumped him!"

"Kid," I said weakly, "I ain't fit to be let loose in my old age. As of right now, you're my deputy!"

(THE END)

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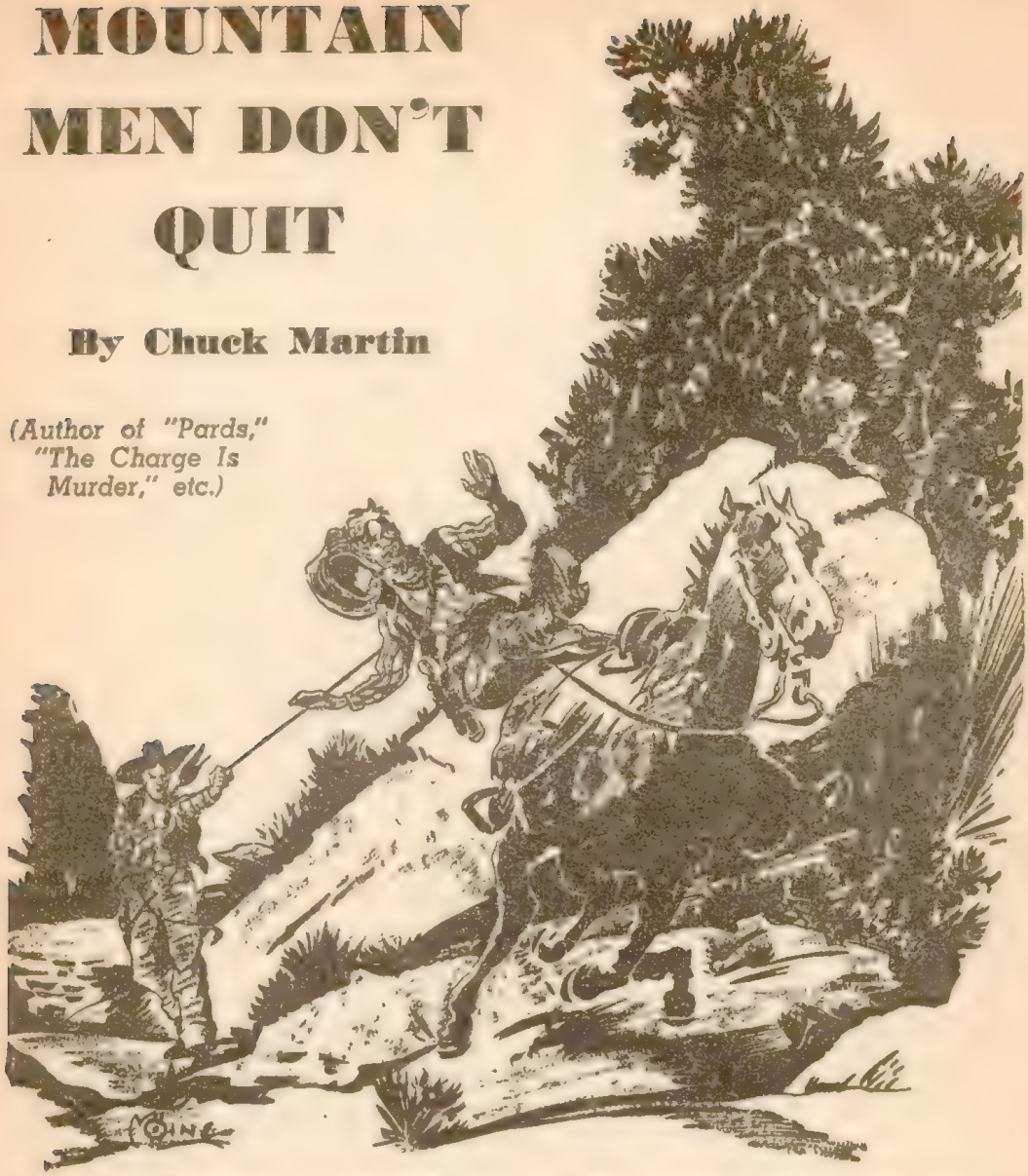
# MOUNTAIN MEN DON'T QUIT

**By Chuck Martin**

*(Author of "Pards," "The Charge Is Murder," etc.)*



*The loop tightened swiftly and dragged the old cattleman from his saddle.*

•

*Mary Tarson came back from the kitchen in time to hear her father and her son declare war on the Triangle Box, though both were sustaining serious wounds. But Mary knew her men folks — it was kill or be killed, and her husband had been found shot in the back . . .*

•

SPRING ROUNDUP had come and gone in the Bear Paw Mountains of Montana. The Half Circle T was once more a two-man outfit, and the two owners were combing the foothills for any strays overlooked by the hired hands.

Mitch Tarson was still a mighty man despite the sixty-odd years which had whitened his shaggy hair and cowhorn mustaches. Crad Tarson was edging twenty, had not attained full growth, but he was moulded along the same lines. Big men,

both of them, better than six feet tall.

Old Mitch twisted in the saddle, raised his snow-thatched head, and wrinkled his long straight nose. Then he neck-reined his stout mountain horse to the left and followed the smell of smoke like a hound on a hot trail.

Young Crad Tarson was a few paces behind the old cattleman when old Mitch slid his horse to a stop at the edge of a brush-fringed clearing. A wide-shouldered man was leaning over a small chip fire in the clearing, and a short-yearling calf was hog-tied, waiting for the iron.

A hissing rope sounded a belated warning from a hole in the brush. The loop circled Mitch Tarson's arms, tightened swiftly, and dragged the old cattleman from his saddle.

Young Crad Tarson gigged his horse with a blunted spur and charged into the clearing. The man by the fire was advancing on old Mitch when Crad Tarson made a running dismount, dragging his spurs to stop the speed of his rush.

"Sig Deifer, you dam' rustler!"

The barn-shouldered man changed his course away from Mitch Tarson to face the Half Circle T cowboy. Crad Tarson had shouted fighting words, and he was backing up his charge with no weapons except his two bare fists.

Sig Deifer squinted his piggish eyes and drew his rounded head down between his shoulder blades. A glancing blow grazed his chin and thudded against a massive shoulder. A straight driving right fist flattened his bulbous nose and brought a gush of crimson to draw first blood.

Crad Tarson followed through with a hundred and fifty-five pounds of fury behind the blow. A pair of huge hands gripped Crad Tarson's wrist like a vise as Sig Deifer stomped down and threw himself backward at the same time.

A knifing pain shot through Crad Tarson's left foot just before he was jerked through the air by the grip on his wrist. Only the blood on his wrist saved him from a broken arm when Deifer's big hands slipped and lost their hold.

Crad Tarson crashed down to plow a furrow through the grassroots with his stubborn chin. For a matter of seconds he lay stunned like a calf which has been "busted" hard to make it "lie" for the piggin' string.

Sig Deifer's thick body went with his roll. He came to his knees, threw himself on his victim, and slugged Crad Tarson on the side of the head.

A slender swarthy man leaped from the brush with a long-bladed knife in his right hand. The gleaming knife flashed down and disappeared in Crad Tarson's back.

Sig Deifer recovered and slapped the swarthy man flat-handed, mumbling thickly because of his bruised lips. His speech was marked by a strong Teutonic accent.

"He is mine, Tony Raffeta. Mit my bare hands I kill the swine!"

A six-shooter roared savagely from the edge of the brush, and Crad Tarson's body twitched under the impact of a heavy slug. Sig Deifer stared stupidly at a waspy little man who was bucking down a heavy .45 Colt six-shooter in his small right hand.

"You killed him, Joe Sargeant," Deifer said, in a far-away voice. "I will finish the old one, *nein?*"

The little gunman tightened his lips and his trigger-finger at the same time. Old Mitch Tarson's shoulders jerked spasmodically. Joe Sargeant spoke in a peculiar rustling whisper to his gaping companions.

"Hit leather and let's get long gone. They won't be found for days, and then we can take over!"

* * *

MITCH TARSON groaned and sat up with a jerk. His fierce gray eyes were filmed with pain and weakness, and for a time he panted as he clutched his left shoulder with his gnarled right hand.

The spring sun was bright without warmth, directly overhead. The old cattleman knew it was high noon; the shooting had taken place just before nine o'clock.

"Crad," old Mitch called to his grandson, and than turned slowly to stare at a huddled figure across the grassy clearing.

Mitch Tarson's eyes widened when he saw a grimy blood-stained hand stretch toward him. Crad was alive, and old Mitch forgot the pain of his own wounds as he staggered toward the crawling cowboy.

"We can't quit now, Mitch," a weak voice whispered hoarsely.

Mitch Tarson threw back his white head like a proud old stallion.

"Hell no! Mountain men don't quit, Cradshaw," old Mitch said proudly. "Lemme have a look at yore hurts."

From some hidden reservoir deep within his tough old frame, Mitch Tarson summoned enough strength to dress his grandson's wounds. Joe Sargeant's bullet had entered high above the left breast, and Mitch Tarson grunted his contempt.

"He didn't allow for us being down on the ground; that's why we're alive."

The old Half Circle T cattleman cut a piece of cloth from Crad Tarson's shirt sleeve, rolled it tightly, and used it to plug up the bullet hole in his grandson's breast. Then he rolled the now unconscious cowboy over, and his gray eyes were like glare ice on a mountain lake, as he stared at a knife from beneath shelving bushy white eyebrows.

"Tony Raffeta's knife," the old cattleman muttered, as he picked up the stained blade. "He hit the shoulder-blade, or Crad would have been a dead dogie!"

Using the knife to cut bandages from Crad Tarson's shirt, the old cattleman stopped the bleeding and made a tight compress. His horse wandered into the clearing and came close, and Mitch Tarson rose unsteadily, fumbled in his saddle-bags, and found a bottle of permanganate.

His first aid finished, Mitch Tarson stared at his grandson's battered face. He leaned forward with his mouth open when Crad Tarson opened his eyes and slowly winked.

"Get me on my horse and I can make it back to the house," Crad whispered. "I've been hurt worse than this, and still did a day's work."

"Yuh damn liar," old Mitch whispered huskily, but his wind-roughened voice was prideful. "Comin' right up with the broncs!"

* * *

MARY TARSON hurried to the front door of the stout log house when a weak voice called from the wind-swept yard. Two horses were standing by the tie-rail. One of the riders was draped across the neck of his horse, tied to the saddle with a catch-rope. The second rider was drooping like a wilted leaf, and he slid down the left side just as Mary Tarson ran down the steps.

Mitch Tarson managed to crawl to the rail where he leaned against the end post. His voice was a foggy whisper as he tried to tell Mary Tarson about her only son.

"Handle Crad easy, Mary. He's been beat up, knifed, and shot. Throw off the ties and get him inside on the couch. Hell no, he ain't a-goin' to cash if you straddle my cayuse and whip it down the hind laigs. It's only seven mile to Doc Smith's place in Red Dog, and time's a-wastin'!"

Mary Tarson was tall, strong, and mountain-bred. She threw off the coils which held her son to the soggy saddle, lifted him in her strong arms, and carried Crad Tarson up the porch steps and into the front room. After making Crad comfortable on a cowskin couch, she hurried outside to help old Mitch.

Mitch Tarson had managed to get to his feet, but his eyes were closed, and his right hand was outstretched like a blind man groping in the dark. Mary Tarson half-carried him into the house and to his room, where she helped him to the bed and pulled off his scarred high-heeled boots. Old Mitch opened his eyes wearily and spoke roughly.

"Light a shuck for Red Dog, gal. I ain't got but a scratch, but Crad needs a sawbones mighty bad. Rattle yore hocks and get long gone!"

* * *

MITCH TARSON closed his eyes drowsily as a deer fly be-

gan to hum against the window pane. The old cattleman mumbled that it was time Mary and Doc Smith were getting back, and what the hell was keeping them? Then his eyes opened as he sat up with both elbows propping his gaunt frame.

He could see Crad Tarson through the crack in the door where the hinges were fastened to the frame. The opening was only an inch wide, and Mitch Tarson stared at his grandson lying on the skin couch with a Hudson Bay blanket covering his body.

Something had aroused old Mitch; a sound which might have been the muffled hooves of a walking horse. Bracing himself on his left elbow, Mitch reached for his six-shooter hanging from a shell-studded belt on the back of a cane chair.

He could not see the front door, but he heard the familiar creak of a hinge when the door was pushed slowly open. A shaft of sunlight filtered into the front room and stopped on the pallid face of young Crad Tarson.

"Goot!" a guttural voice muttered. "Mit my bare hands I strangle the swinehundt!"

Old Mitch Tarson began to tremble, and beads of sweat stood out on his forehead beneath his shaggy white thatch. He recognized the voice of Sigfried Deifer, and then he saw the massive rustler through the crack of the door.

Deifer shuffled toward the couch, hands taloned like claws. A wave of weakness swept over Mitch Tarson, but he summoned up his remaining strength to raise the old six-shooter in his gnarled right fist.

The gun shook and started to sag. The crack in the door began to shrink as Mitch Tarson winked his eyes to find the gun-sights.

Sig Deifer was breathing loudly through his broken, flattened nose, making a sound like a wind-broken horse with the heaves. Then those taloned hands touched the unprotected throat of his unconscious victim.

Mitch cleared his eyes just as a gasping cough came from the front room. The old cattleman's hand steadied, and his eyes were clear and bright as he lined his sights and slowly squeezed the trigger.

Deifer sprawled backward as the explosion roared through the low-ceilinged room and acrid powder smoke stung Mitch Tarson's throat. He sank back gasping.

"Nice shootin', Mitch, ole mossy-back," a weak voice whispered through the silence that followed the roar of the old cattleman's gun, and the rattle of Deifer's boots.

Mitch Tarson closed his eyes and sank down into a deep dark refuge of warm blankets and down pillows. The deer fly began to hum against the window pane. When a man was down on bedground with his head under him, he had to take his rest.

* * *

TWO HORSES roared into the Half Circle T ranch yard, sliding to a stop at the tie-rail. Mary Tarson ran up the steps and into the front room; the doctor carried his black bag in one hand, a cocked six-shooter in the other.

She stopped suddenly, a little cry gasping from her throat. The body of Sigfried Deifer was sprawled on the floor just inside the open door, and Doc Smith pushed Mary gently aside.

"He's dead, Mary," Doc Smith said quietly, but with definite satisfaction. "Shot through the heart, and not a second too soon from the looks of those scratches on young Crad's throat!"

"Then Dad must have killed him," Mary whispered. "But the door to his room. He can't see out here from his bed!"

Smith walked slowly to the door and pointed to a splinter near the middle hinge.

"That's tophand shooting. Old Mitch shot through the crack of that door, and he didn't throw off his shot. I better have a look at him first."

"Is he. . . dead?" Mary whispered, with one hand covering her lips.

"Naw," the doctor scoffed, after feeling for a pulse. "Old Mitch is stout as a bull and twice as stubborn, but he's lost considerable blood.

Bring a basin and some hot water, and help me cut this old wool shirt away. I'll look at Crad while you get things ready."

Crad Tarson opened his eyes with a start when the doctor touched his throat. Two hands shot from beneath the blanket and clutched the doctor's wrist, and then fell back to the covers.

"Doc!" the cowboy muttered. "I thought you was Sig Deifer. He had me by the throat when old Mitch busted a cap!"

"And saved your life, cow feller," Doc Smith said roughly, as he winked a tear from his eyes. "Now you just lie back and take 'er easy. I'll give you something to make you sleep. Probing for that bullet is going to hurt me worse than it will you."

"Probe for old Mitch's slug first," Crad Tarson muttered drowsily, then his eyes closed.

CRAD TARSON was propped up against the big pillow from an old Morris chair, on the couch in the big front room. Old Mitch was preening his white mustaches in a shaft of warm sunlight slanting in from the open door. He was riding a wooden horse, as he called the heavy rocking chair in which he was seated.

Most of the color had returned to the old cattleman's face, because Mitch Tarson had been up and about for three days. The wound in his chest had etched a few added lines on the old warrior's leathery features, but he remarked to Crad that he was ready for war and eager to be about his snake-killing.

Crad Tarson listened and smiled to soften the hard outlines of his battle-scarred face. It was ten days since he and old Mitch had jumped the rustlers branding a Half Circle T calf with their Triangle Box iron.

"That knife cut don't bother me much, but my left arm is a bit stiff yet," Crad Tarson inventoried. "It's my left foot that hurts most where Sig Deifer stomped me with his boot-heel. Doc Smith allowed a bone was broke, but that won't keep me from riding a horse."

"We got to get out there and make a go-around," Mitch Tarson said fretfully. "Joe Sargeant and Tony Raffeta will rustle us blind while we're bogged down here on bedground."

Crad Tarson nodded and puckered his eyes thoughtfully. The Triangle Box was a two-man outfit since old Mitch had settled for Sig Deifer.

"The cattle can wait," Crad said slowly. "Give me a few more days to get back my strength with Ma's cooking, and you and me will ride gun-sign on that pair of wolves!"

Mary Tarson came from the kitchen in time to hear the declaration of war. The expression on her face did not change, because Mary Tarson knew her men folks. It was kill or be killed, and her husband had been found shot in the back when Crad was fourteen years old.

Mary Tarson made no mention of the law. Charley Tarson had appealed to the law when ten head of Half Circle T steers had disappeared mysteriously. The next day Charley Tarson had been found dead near the ford of Bitter Root Creek.

"I'll have to take the wagon and drive to Red Dog for supplies," Mary Tarson said casually, but her eyes watched the face of old Mitch.

The old cattleman nodded and twisted the ends of his mustache with his right hand. A quilted comfort covered his bony knees, and his gun-belt was buckled around his hips.

"Better fetch me some tobacco for my pipe, Mary," he requested, without meeting her eyes. "Me and Crad can make out until you get back. We'll look for you along about noon."

"Take care of yourself, Mom," Crad Tarson told his mother gravely. "I'm glad you're wearing Dad's old six-shooter. No telling when a feller might jump a varmint out of the brush."

That's the way it was when Mary Tarson harnessed a team and drove away from the Half Circle T. Mountain men were patient, but they had to eat. When the rattle of wheels had died away, Crad Tarson threw back his blanket and swung his feet to the floor.

"Mind that busted foot, Crad," old Mitch warned sharply. "You've got

to take it easy like Doc Smith said."

"Yeah," Crad agreed, and then he hobbled across the room. "That plaster cast is like iron," he told old Mitch with a grin. "I could ride today if I had it to do," he boasted. "It's only a matter of four miles over to the Triangle Box spread."

"Nuh uh," the old cattleman grunted. "I was thinking the same thing, but them two can wait. Joe Sargeant is almighty fast with his shooting pistol, and Raffeta can throw that knife of his like a bullet. This time next week we'll both be in better shape to settle our tally."

CRAD TARSON hobbled about the room for exercise. His right hand rubbed the butt of his holstered six-shooter from time to time, and his blue eyes took on a smokey hue every time he glanced out across the yard.

Mitch Tarson watched without seeming to notice, and he read the signs of repressed impatience. Young Crad was clenching his big hands, stabbing at his gun, and twitching his right shoulder. A day or two more would be all the longer Crad would remain inactive.

The morning dragged slowly without much talk between the two convalescents. When Crad sat down on the couch, old Mitch got up and paced the floor. Crad Tarson came to his feet when the rattle of wheels took old Mitch to the open door.

"That's our wagon, and the team is running wild!" Crad shouted at his grandfather. "Something's happened to Ma!"

Mitch Tarson was down the porch steps and into the yard before Crad had finished speaking. The team came through the gate at a slower pace with the leather lines dragging. They headed for the horse barn and stopped at the barred entrance which made an aisle between the stalls in the barn.

Crad Tarson forgot his broken foot as he hobbled after old Mitch. Mary Tarson was nowhere in sight, but the cattleman grunted softly as he climbed up on the front wheel.

'Take 'er easy, son," old Mitch said to Crad. "Mary's here on the wagon bed with yore Pa's gun near her hand. She must have cut wolf-sign somewhere out there in the tangles!"

Mary Tarson moaned softly and sat up just as Crad climbed into the high wagon. The provisions were scattered about from the bouncing of the wagon, and Crad's mother put a hand to her head where a trickle of blood stained her graying hair.

"You're hurt, Ma," Crad Tarson said hoarsely, and his big right arm went around his mother. "Who done it?"

Mary Tarson shuddered and pointed to her old Stetson hat which was lying on a sack of flour. Two holes through the crown just above the band showed where a bullet had scored a passage. An inch lower, and the scalp wound would have been fatal.

"I don't know for sure," Mary Tarson said slowly. "I was crossing the ford down at Bitter Root Creek. The team stopped to drink, and a rifle cracked from the brush over on this side."

"You fired your six-shooter twice," old Mitch said stonily. "Who was you shooting at, Mary?"

Mary Tarson shook her head, eyes half-closed. "I was standing behind the seat," she said wearily. "My hat flew off when the rifle barked, and I shot at something moving down there in the brush. A man yelled, and then the horses ran away. I think I fainted."

"Help your Ma to the house, Crad," the old cattleman said quietly, but his voice hummed in his corded throat. "I'll saddle the horses for that ride we was talking about!"

* * *

MARY TARSON stood in the doorway with a bandage around her head, leaning against the oaken frame. Neither Crad nor Mitch had said much when they had mounted their horses and had ridden out of the Half Circle T yard. Both had waved their right hands.

"We'll be back soon," Crad called belatedly, and his mother had

answered with a smile of understanding.

Crad Tarson's face was a frozen mask through which his eyes burned to tell of the anger smouldering in his heart. He had taken a beating at the hands of Sig Deifer. He had been knifed, shot, his left foot broken. He hadn't complained because he was a man.

A low savage murmur rumbled from his tight lips. Mary Tarson was a woman, and his mother. Some cowardly dry-gulcher had tried to kill her, and someone was going to die.

Mitch Tarson heard the growl and nodded approval. The old cattleman's face had the look of a hunting hawk as he watched brush when they came to Bitter Root Creek. It was old Mitch who swung down from the saddle to circle for sign.

The old cattleman was leaning over, studying the ground as he walked into the dense brush. Crad Tarson sat his saddle with his right hand on his holstered gun. Then old Mitch shouted hoarsely, like a baying hound which has found a hot scent.

"Mary winged the varmint, son. There's a spoor of blood leading up a deer trail!"

Crad Tarson gigged his horse into the rush, and the six-shooter leaped from his holster with his thumb curling back the hammer. The deep-chested horse breasted through the brush and came out into the deer trail.

Mitch Tarson was half-running with his gaunt frame crouched over as he followed a trail of crimson blotches. The old cattleman gripped his six-shooter in his right hand, and he did not see the brush wave up the trail.

Crad Tarson saw the movement just as the barrel of a rifle poked through a hole in the buckthorn. With a speed born of desperation, Crad Tarson triggered a shot just as the rifle barked like the lash of a bull whip.

Old Mitch Tarson grunted and went to his knees. The rifleman yelled and pitched out from the brush. Crad Tarson bucked his six-shooter down, caught the rifleman in his sights, and he recognized the swarthy face of Tony Raffeta just as he pressed trigger.

Raffeta was battered back under the impact of the heavy slug, the smoking rifle slipping from his hands. He fell on his back with only his boots in the trail; Crad Tarson turned his horse and rode back to his grandfather.

MITCH TARSON was sitting up in the trail with his hand pressed to his left side. He snarled at Crad when the cowboy asked how bad he was hurt.

"Just a bullet-burn across the short ribs," the old cattleman said sourly. "Light down off that cayuse and hunt cover, you salty yearlin'!"

Crad Tarson jerked erect as he remembered Joe Sargeant. His horse took a step to hide old Mitch in the trail. Crad started to swing down from the saddle, favoring his left foot in the heavy plaster cast.

"Hang and rattle, cowboy!"

Crad Tarson had holstered his gun, and his right leg was coming back behind the cantle of his saddle. The pressure on his broken foot stabbed like a knife, and ignoring the sudden command, Crad swung his right leg back again to find the stirrup.

Joe Sargeant was standing wide-legged in the trail, a little man with a bony face, and piercing black eyes. The cocked gun in his right hand swung up as Crad Tarson settled back in the saddle.

A gun roared behind Crad Tarson to start his horse to bucking. Joe Sargeant was hurled backward just as he pressed trigger to blast a wild shot off-side.

Joe Sargeant rolled to his knees, changing the smoking gun to his left hand. He was curling the hammer back when Crad Tarson cleared leather and beat the little gunman to the shot.

Sargeant screamed with both hands battered and bleeding. Mitch Tarson's slug had shattered his right hand; Crad's bullet had crippled the rustler's left hand for life.

(Continued On Page 94)

# THEY DIDN'T JUST GROW

*Turkey-Talk About Lawmen in the Old West*

## By Z. A. Tilghman

SHERIFFS and marshals are a vital part of Western and adventure stories, a part of real history. The fictioneer uses them as he will. When it comes to true accounts, however, there are rules and limitations, which readers often fail to understand.

When Congress organized a Territory—as all our Western States once were—the Act established the boundaries; provided for an elected assembly, and for administrative officers, a governor, secretary, judges, district attorney, and a United States Marshal. All of these were appointed by official written commissions from the President.

The assembly—under various names—performed the usual work of a legislature. It passed civil and criminal laws, provided for county and town governments, schools, and elections.

A sheriff was usually elected, but temporary appointments could be made by the county commissioners. His authority extended only to the confines of his county. If he pursued a criminal beyond these, it was his duty to call upon the nearest local officer, before taking the offender. The number of deputies allowed him depended on the size and population of the county, and the amount of tax money available. For emergencies, he could hire temporary deputies or possemen. A sum of money was usually set aside for such hire. Any peace officer has authority to call upon citizens for help against an adversary. Such calls are not frequent, and are not expected to be paid for; as when a prisoner might break and run, and citizens help to catch him.

THE UNITED States Marshal held his commission from the President, and he operated under the Department of Justice at Washington, receiving orders from there, and making annual or quarterly reports. His authority was also limited to an area; sometimes the entire Territory. But large or populous Territories would be cut into two or three districts, each with its marshal.

The Marshal was allowed an office deputy and suitable offices provided. He had a certain number of field deputies, sometimes ten or twelve. The marshal issued them written commissions, and their salaries were paid from an appropriation by Congress. A yearly sum was allowed the marshal for possemen and guards. Travel expenses were allowed the deputies, and they had to keep strict account, presenting signed vouchers from hotelmen, railroads and others. Since they handled all cases of train and express robberies, the railroads usually gave them each an annual pass.

Often a criminal would escape across the line, and be clear away before the pursuing deputy could contact one in that district. Hence the marshals usually gave courtesy commissions to two or three deputies in adjoining districts. These carried no pay, but enabled the holders to pursue their quarry across the lines.

NEITHER marshal nor sheriff had authority to arrest without a warrant, unless he actually

witnessed a crime. The office deputies, working with the District Attorney, gave out the warrants to the deputies. A warrant states the name of the person, the crime of which he is accused, and orders the officer to take him into custody. If the name was unknown, they wrote *John Doe,* and these were called *John Doe Warrants.* A federal jail was maintained in each marshal's district, and was under his control. When a deputy delivered a prisoner, with his warrant, he received a receipt from the jailer. The deputy marshals also served subpoenas and other court processes.

Town marshals were to keep the local peace, and their authority was prescribed by the city council. They did not need warrants, since they were generally on the spot. They often held a courtesy commission from the sheriff, as deputy, and thus could serve a warrant if the sheriff told them to watch for wanted men.

There is much confusion about rewards. Official rewards are usually offered by the Governor of the State or Territory; and only for heinous crimes. They must come out of the Governor's emergency fund, which had many other calls upon it. Railroads and express companies would often offer rewards, and other large business such as cattle associations or mines, which had suffered.

Nine times out of ten, rewards are offered for *arrest and conviction.* If the officers unluckily killed their man; if they could not muster sufficient evidence to convict; or if the accused by means of perjury, a hung jury or any other means escaped conviction, the reward could not be claimed.

Only rarely, for notorious killers, have rewards been offered *dead or alive.* For these, it was only necessary to produce and identify the person.

Belle Starr, the famous woman bandit, remembered this when brought before her husband's body. The men who had killed him counted upon her grief to prove his identity. Belle forced herself to calmness, and with a careless glance walked out, saying, "I'm sorry, gentlemen, you've got the wrong man. You'll have to kill Jim Reed before you can claim the reward for him."

(THE END)

STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, ETC., REQUIRED BY THE ACTS OF CONGRESS OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AND MARCH 3, 1933

Of Famous Western published quarterly at Holyoke, Mass., for October 1, 1944.

State of New York }
County of New York } ss.

Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Louis H. Silberkleit, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the publisher of Famous Western and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief a true statement of the ownership, management (and if a daily paper, the circulation), etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Louis H. Silberkleit, 241 Church Street, N. Y. 13, N. Y.; Editor, Robert W. Lowndes, 241 Church Street, N. Y. 13, N. Y.; Managing Editor, Louis H. Silberkleit, 241 Church Street, N. Y. 13, N. Y.; Business Manager, Maurice Coyne, 241 Church Street N. Y. 13, N. Y.

2. That the owner is: (If owned by a corporation, its name and address must be stated and also immediately thereunder the names and addresses of stockholders owning or holding one per cent or more of total amount of stock. If not owned by a corpration, the names and addresses of the individual owners must be given. If owned by a firm, company, or other unincorporated concern, its name and address as well as those of each individual member, must be given.) Columbia Publications, Inc., 241 Church Street, N. Y. 13, N. Y.; Louis H. Silberkleit, 241 Church Street, N. Y. 13, N. Y.; Maurice Coyne, 241 Church Street, N. Y. 13, N. Y.; Harold Hammond, 241 Church Street, N. Y. 13, N. Y.

3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: (If there are none, so state.) None.

4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner; and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest direct or indirect in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him.

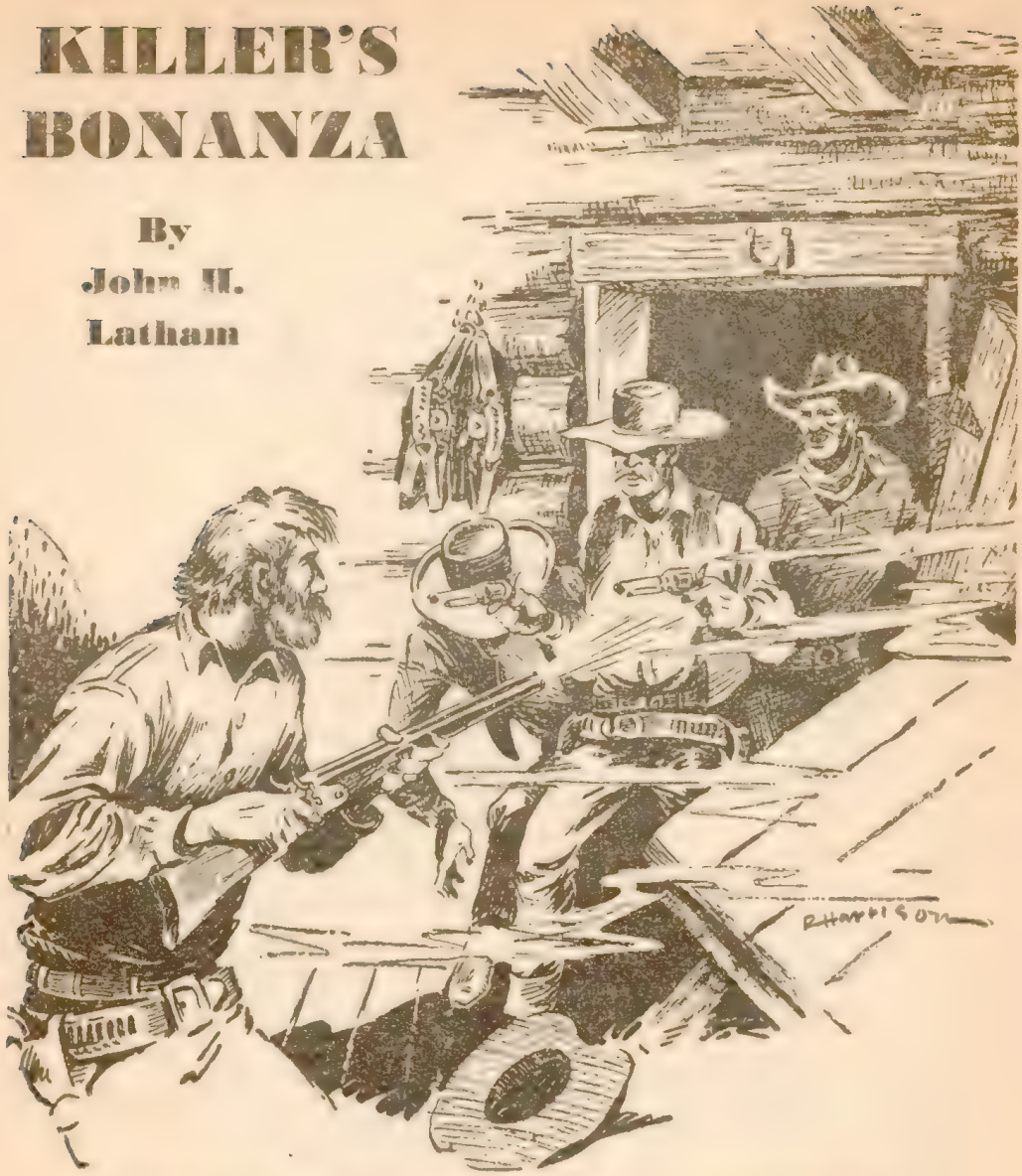
5. That the average number of copies of each issue of this publication sold or distributed, through the mails or otherwise, to paid subscribers during the twelve months preceding the date shown above is—(This information is required from daily publications only.)

LOUIS H. SILBERKLEIT
(Signature of Publisher)

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 29th day of September, 1944. Maurice Coyne. (My commission expires March 30, 1946.) [SEAL]

# KILLER'S BONANZA

By John H. Latham



*It was only those two guns he carried that commanded what little measure of respect the town still had for the sheriff.*

★ ★ ★

*The town was laughing at old "Mosshead" Slater, but Slater knew they wouldn't laugh long. The series of killings that had him behind the 8 ball were too serious for continued mirth. And when the town lost its temper, a helpless, innocent man might have to swing . . .*

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

A GROUP of bearded, mackinaw-clad miners stood on the porch of Ma Riley's boarding house and watched Sheriff John "Mosshead" Slater jog down the street on his stringy sorrel mare.

"There goes the old saddle bum," one of them remarked, loud enough for the lawman to hear. "Been out chasing the 'Ghost Killer' on his hoss ag'in. It's time this town got itself a new badge-toter, men—one that

won't use the law to keep his outlaw friends out of jail!"

It was bitter medicine for the sheriff to swallow, but he rode on without a glance at the men. He knew the town hated him; that was becoming more apparent every day. In the past few weeks, since the Ghost Killer first struck down a hapless miner in the hills, old Mosshead had become accustomed to the cold stares, gibes, and open hostility of the town.

Even the term "Ghost Killer" was meant to ridicule the sheriff. Everybody in town believed hulking, dull-witted Dan Rider, who had received a head injury in a mine accident some months previous, to be the killer. Big Tince Clemmons, owner of the richest claim on Indian Creek, had openly accused the sheriff of protecting Dan with his law badge.

"One more killing and this town will take the law in its own hands," Clemmons had warned him. "If you don't see that Dan is brought to justice, we'll use a hang-noose!"

The sheriff was thinking of that when he racked his jaded bronc at the rail in front of the jail and swung stiffly from the saddle. For the Ghost Killer had struck again. Old Mosshead had just returned from a twenty mile ride to Indian Creek, where he'd found Frank Hanna murdered and his cabin showing the effects of a systematic search. And as usual, Mosshead hadn't found a single clue.

He crossed the wooden sidewalk with a rheumatic limp, a gaunt, gray-mustached old man whose thick-banded Chihuahua spurs roweled soft music. That was something else that made the town mad. The cattle had long since drifted from this range. The ranches were deserted, with houses and corrals torn down for the most part to build shanties for the miners. Gold had changed the old way of life, yet Mosshead Slater lived on like a ghost of the past. In a mining town he wore spurs and rusty old high-heeled boots, shaded his faded blue eyes with a wide-brimmed hat, and reminisced forever about the bygone days when he was a brush-popper with the Rider's Lazy 8 outfit.

So the town called him a saddle bum, an old "mosshead" that had outgrown his usefulness. But for the hickory-handled forty-fives that swung at his hips, some of the hot-headed sons of Slater, Arizona, might have attempted to run him out. Those guns commanded the little respect accorded Sheriff John Slater.

INSIDE the office a beefy, round-faced miner crowded the pot-bellied little stove, for there was a bleak wind off San Pedro Peak, and a touch of winter in the air. Seeing him old Mosshead lifted his tired shoulders, wiped the look of weariness and dejection from his leathery face.

"Howdy, Tince," he said, peeling off his shabby brush jacket and hanging it on a nail. "Been around long?"

"Not long," said Big Tince Clemmons, and today old Mosshead found he was too worried and tired to be irritated by the man's blunt, forceful way. "What did you find on Indian Creek?"

"Just what you thought I'd find," returned the sheriff, morosely. "Old Frank Hanna dead his cabin ransacked and his gold gone. His body wasn't forty feet from his placer diggin's there at the mouth of Oak Creek. Head bashed in with a pick handle. I'm too old to walk in and bring the body on my horse, so I left it for a wagon. You might send some of the boys out to pick it up."

"I will," said Clemmons, staring at the lawman with his round, hard eyes. "Any lead this time?"

"None," Mosshead admitted. "Not even a track. Whoever committed the crime was sure *bueno* at hiding sign. You would think this killing was done by a ghost, sure enough. I reckon it's got me stumped, Tince."

"It looks like you've come to the end of the trail," Clemmons said flatly. He continued in a different voice, "Don't let it worry you, old timer. You've done your bit for the country. Trouble is times have

changed. We've all got to get old sometime, and I reckon it's about time for you to step down from the saddle and let a younger man take over."

"Meaning you?" Mosshead demanded.

"The boys have asked me to run for sheriff," Clemmons answered, nodding.

The old lawman saw red. Getting old and useless, was he! Why he'd come to this Indian Creek country long before Tince Clemmons saw the light of day, choused wild cattle on the brushy slopes of San Pedro before men scarred her flanks with the dumps of the Gold Turkey, Rich Indian, and other mines. The town was named after him—Slater, Arizona. He'd jailed Rep Dailey and Tom Masters, run the Curly Wolf Gang plumb out of the Territory and—

THE SHERIFF expelled a long sigh. He was getting old, he admitted to himself. His tendency to live and think in the past was proof of it. Just a rheumatic, stove-up old brush-popper trying to fill a young man's boots. In the old days, when all a lawman needed was a batch of iron guts and a lightning draw, he'd filled the bill. Now, with a killer lurking in the hills, murdering and robbing miners, old Mosshead felt helpless.

"I reckon you'll make 'em a good sheriff," he said by way of ending the interview.

Clemmons took a heavy buckskin poke from his mackinaw pocket and pitched it on the desk.

"Keep this for me," he ordered. "Until this Ghost Killer is brought to justice, I'll not be having any dust around my cabin. And, Sheriff—remember what I told you about the town taking the law in its own hands!"

The miner left. Old Mosshead opened his rickety safe and dumped the gold sack inside, then propped his rusty boots on the spur-scarred desk and tried to do some constructive thinking about the case. It was futile. For days the old man had been in the saddle, riding the hills in search of the phantom killer, and weariness was an infinite pain that wracked his body. In a few minutes his head sagged on his chest, and he slept from sheer exhaustion.

* * *

The sheriff knew he was being watched. He struggled up through the fog of sleep, lifted his head to find young Dan Rider sitting by the stove, his eyes dull and lifeless as usual.

"Why did he do it?" Dan asked. "Why did he hit me from behind that way, Mr. Slater?"

Sudden excitement gripped the sheriff. Dan had been working for Big Tince Clemmons at his Indian Creek claim when the accident occurred. Nobody knew exactly how it happened. Clemmons claimed he had left Dan handling the hoist, come back to find him at the bottom of the shallow shaft with a bucket of mud spilled over his body. Apparently the rope had broken, and the heavy bucket knocked Dan down the shaft. Since then Dan had wandered around the country like a person in a daze.

"Who hit you?" the sheriff demanded. "How did it happen? Tell me about it, son."

"I reckon he did," said Dan, twisting his face in an effort at concentration.

"Tince Clemmons?" Mosshead's voice was sharp with hope.

"No," Dan answered. "It wasn't Tince Clemmons, Mr. Slater. It was Him. He did it Up There."

The young man hooked his thumb, pointing up, and the sheriff sank back with something akin to a groan. Just seeing the son of his old boss in this condition hurt Mosshead Slater more than anything the town could ever do to him. Dan was the main reason the old lawman kept hanging on when he knew he was licked, trying to track down the real killer and prove that Wayne Rider's boy was not a cold-blooded murderer.

"Never mind," the sheriff said soothingly. "Maybe we'll get you to that specialist in Chicago one of

these days, younker. I know he can fix you up. And I wouldn't go blaming the Big Boss about it, Dan. I reckon He didn't plan for things to come out like this. Just an accident, that's all."

"Just an accident," Dan echoed, and gave the sheriff a sudden smile.

That smile cut the old man to the heart. Looking at Dan, Mosshead could hardly repress a shudder. He had the lean, flat build of a man born to the saddle. He had his dad's gray eyes and jutting chin, and his features were blunt but handsomely chiseled, with lines of strength and courage etched in them. It was Dan's eyes that gave him the look of a helpless, dull-witted animal—empty, vacuous, uncomprehending.

OLD MOSSHEAD had written a famous doctor in Tucson, telling him about the accident and what it had done to Dan. The medico didn't handle cases involving the brain, he wrote the sheriff regretfully, but he had a friend in Chicago that specialized in brain surgery. It would cost a lot, but the medico was certain his colleague could cure Dan. It had the earmarks of an easy case, just a simple operation to take the pressure off his brain.

"Maybe we'll round-up the money one of these days," Mosshead said, but there was little hope in his voice.

The statement caused Dan to grin widely, and a look of intelligence came into his gray eyes.

"Money?" he echoed. "Why, I've got the money, Mr. Slater. It's for —for—now let me see, the—the operation! That's what it's for. Frank Hanna said it would be a good use for his gold dust. Said he was old and useless and didn't need anything that money could buy. He give it to me so I could get operated on.

"Why, what's the matter, Mr. Slater?"

The sheriff's face was gray and mottled. He got up and stood in front of Dan, keeping his voice quiet and trying not to excite the young man.

"You say you got some money from Frank Hanna, Danny?" he asked.

"I—I think that's right," Dan answered haltingly. "It may have been from Pete Jebro." His eyes clouded. "It seems to me that Mr. Jebro give me money too."

The sheriff rocked as if from a physical blow. He had wanted to believe Dan's story about Frank Hanna giving him money, but the mention of Jebro removed any doubt from his mind that Dan was really the Ghost Killer. Pete Jebro had been the first miner struck down, a kindly old man who had befriended the boy on more than one occasion. The idea that Dan murdered these two harmless, benevolent old desert rats appalled Mosshead. The sheriff knew that both had given food and shelter to the big, stringy-muscled youth who was sick in his mind, and neither would be a match for his bull strength.

"Give me the money, Dan," he commanded harshly.

Dan pulled a buckskin poke from his shabby brush jacket and handed it to Mosshead. There was a hurt look in his vacuous eyes.

"Sure, Mr. Slater," he said. "I meant to bring the dust to you. Frank Hanna told me to. He said you'd worked for dad, and was my friend. That's what everybody else says too." Puzzlement came into Dan's eyes. "Folks say if it wasn't for you I'd be in jail, and maybe they'll just hang us both. I heard a bunch of 'em talking up at the Bonanza Bar. I thought they was going to hurt me, but Mr. Clemmons made them wait. He laughed and said I wouldn't run off. He told the others I was too crazy to go up in the hills and hide.

"Do you think I'm crazy, Moss—Mr. Slater?"

"No," said the sheriff, and there were tears in his eyes. "You're not crazy, Dan. You're sick in your mind, just like other folks get sick to their belly. You look tired, younker. You better come back in the jail and lay down for a while."

Dan had slept in the jail a lot of

times. He followed readily, but a look of bewilderment came into his eyes when Mosshead clicked the key in the lock.

"Why you locking me in?" he asked dully. "I ain't done anything."

"You better stay back here a while, Dan," the sheriff answered, and his voice was ragged with feeling. "I guess it's the best way. I reckon you didn't mean to kill Frank Hanna."

"Did—did I kill old Frank?" Dan asked, his eyes growing round. "I saw him yesterday. He give me some gold dust then. Said it was for an operation."

Mosshead turned away to hide the look of agony in his old faded blue eyes. From the looks of things, Frank Hanna had been dead about two days. With his little world crumbling about him, the sheriff went back into his office. Just an old fool, he thought bitterly, who had caused the death of Frank Hanna because he couldn't believe Dan Rider was a killer—had refused to even lock him up. Well, the evidence was there before him, a buckskin poke of gold dust that he had pitched on the desk. He took it and locked it in his safe, then sat down to wait for the delegation of town folks that he knew would put in an appearance soon.

* * *

BIG TINCE Clemmons was leading them. He shoved heavily through the door, and a crowd of burly, bearded miners stomped in after him. The motley, cold-eyed crew ranged around the room, and all eyes were on the lean, gray-haired old lawman. He noted that Big Tince had a noticeable bulge under his mackinaw. Some of the other miners wore guns too.

"This is the showdown, Sheriff," Clemmons said in a strident voice. "We know that Dan Rider is the killer. I saw him at Frank Hanna's claim day before yesterday. Didn't see old Frank all day yesterday, so I asked you to ride out.

"You found Hanna dead, and you got the boy here now. You been protecting him with that law badge long enough. We got nothing ag'in you, but you can't let a killer run loose in the hills just because he's son of an old friend of yours.

"The boys here are 'pointing me deputy sheriff, whether you like it or not. We aim to see that justice is done. We're putting it to you like this cold turkey, and we want an answer now!

"Call your hand, Slater!"

The old sheriff's heavy breathing filled the moment of silence, while his bleak eyes under thick gray brows roved the assembled miners.

"I got Dan locked up back there," he said finally. "Reckon I was plumb wrong, boys. Dan brought in a poke of gold dust while ago, and said he got it off'n Frank Hanna. There warn't nothing else I could do, so I locked him up."

The old man's eyes blazed around the room.

"You all know he's sick in his mind," he went on grimly. "You also know he ain't responsible for anything he does. He just don't realize what he's doing. You ain't going to take the boy out and hang him! That's final. This is going to be done according to law. When the body comes we'll hold the usual inquest, then ship Danny down to Tucson where he'll stand trial in regular court.

"If he's found guilty there—well, they'll probably send him to a hospital for crazy people somewhere, and that's worse'n being in the pen!"

MOSSHEAD'S explosive sigh was an eloquent ending for his terse declaration. His eyes swept the room, his gnarled hands hovering near his hickory-handled six-shooters. Big Tince spoke, and stilled any protest on the part of the men. His hard eyes blazed at the old sheriff, hot with triumph.

"So you finally proved his guilt!" he exclaimed exultantly. "That saves us the trouble of trying to build a case ag'in Dan. Naturally we would

have to go easy long as there was any doubt, but now—"

His bold, contemptuous eyes swept the room, and told Mosshead as plain as words that the miners would never permit Dan to be taken to Tucson. After the inquest they meant to draw him high on a hang-noose. Knowing that the old sheriff still held his peace. He even let a thin smile touch his lips. The years might have slowed down his thinking processes, made him a failure at tracking down cunning killers, but he still had his guns.

"There'll be an inquest," the sheriff said steadfastly. "You all heard my statement. It's the law, and things will be done that way long as I'm in office."

"You won't be in office long!" a miner jeered. "I reckon Big Tince will be sheriff after the next election—if not 'fore then!"

"Be that as it may," the sheriff returned, "I'm still running things."

"The sheriff is right, men," said Big Tince. He gave old Mosshead a confident smile. "I'm with you, all the way! The boys brought the body in to the Bonanza Bar. Supposing we take Dan down there, and hold the inquest in a bigger place."

"Bring Frank's body down here," Mosshead directed. "A saloon is no place for such proceedings."

Big Tince and some of the men went after the body. The sheriff made his simple preparations for the hearing. He brought Dan Rider out of the cell and put shackles on his wrists, avoiding the boy's dull stare. Then the lawman opened the safe and dragged out the two pokes of gold dust.

The sheriff was surprised to find the bags about the same size. Frowning, he opened one and sifted the dust through his fingers. He knew very little about gold, viewing it with all the distrust and distaste that an old time cowman can muster. This dust was fine grained, stained a coppery red. Mosshead opened the other sack. He could tell no difference in the gold, so he placed one poke back in the safe and pitched the other on the desk.

The body was brought in and placed on an improvised table made of planks laid across two chairs. Dan Rider's eyes grew big with wonder. His face assumed a clammy pallor, and beads of sweat stood out on his forehead. Mosshead saw that the boy's fists were gripped on the rungs of his chair, making the knuckles pop out white against the skin. He didn't look at Dan after that.

"Let's get started," Clemmons suggested, by way of bringing the meeting to order.

The miners ranged around the room, squatting on their haunches against the wall when chairs weren't available. Big Tince took charge of the proceedings, and the old sheriff was content to sit and listen. He was convinced of Dan's guilt, certain that any court would reach a like verdict, and the only emotion of which he was conscious was a great pity for the dull-witted boy.

CLEMMONS quickly appointed a jury, and told his story to the six men. He had seen the defendant, Dan Rider, at Frank Hanna's shack on the day the old miner was killed. Hanna hadn't been around his diggings the following day. Worried, Big Tince reported the matter to the sheriff, and Mosshead rode out and found the miner dead.

"He give me the money," Dan broke in, staring at the corpse. "He said he was old and useless and didn't need no luxuries. Said I needed an op—op—What was that big word, Mr. Slater?"

"Never mind, Dan," said Mosshead quietly. He took the stand and verified Clemmons's story, then told about Dan bringing in the poke of gold dust.

"Dan claims Frank Hanna gave him the money, just like you heard. I've heard Frank say more'n once the miners ought to take up a collection and ship Dan to that specialist in Chicago. You all know how goodhearted he was. I might believe Dan's story, 'cept he told me Pete Jebro give him dust too. Reckon that's

carrying a coincidence too far, with both men dead."

An ugly murmur ran around the room, and Dan gave the sheriff his bewildered smile. "Mr. Jebro was a nice man," he said, licking his lips.

"The gold is there on the table," the sheriff went on woodenly. "One of you men with mine savvy might step up and look at it. I don't know much about these things."

A lank, hook-nosed miner in a sheepskin coat picked up the poke and spilled some of the dust on the table. He pinched it between thumb and finger, then gave Mosshead a bleak look.

"There's no doubt this came from Frank Hanna's claim," he declared. "This gold is diffrent from anything else taken out of Indian Creek. Old Frank's claim straddles the mouth of Oak Creek, and the dust comes from that canyon. It's flour gold, with a kind of rusty color peculiar to the vein it come from. Gold above the mouth of Oak Creek, where the rest of us have claims, is flaky and cleaner in color. I reckon this cinches the case ag'in Dan Rider!"

"Then what are we waiting for?" somebody growled. "Fetch along a rope, Bill!"

THERE WAS an instant uproar. Old Mosshead's voice cut into it like a cold blast.

"Order!" he roared, rising and kicking back his chair. "Fogarty, you say Frank Hanna's gold is diffrent from anything else along the creek?"

"It shore is," Fogarty agreed. He pulled a tobacco sack from his pocket and spilled more gold on the desk. "This is regular Indian Creek gold. You can see that's not at all like this from Frank Hanna's claim. It's flaky, coarse, and—"

He broke off, for old Mosshead had whirled to the safe and yanked out another poke of gold dust. He spilled some on the table with eager, trembling fingers.

"Where did that come from?" he demanded.

"Cut out the damn foolishness," Big Tince Clemmons roared, shoving forward. "Bill, bring on that rope. Men, don't let this old longhorn stall any longer. I—"

Old Mosshead's long-barreled six-guns brought instant order in the room. Nobody saw him draw them. They just seemed to materialize, black bores swinging slowly to covet every man in the room.

"Fogarty, where did that gold come from?"

"Why, the same place," said the puzzled miner. "What has this got to do with—"

"That's all I want to know!" Mosshead cut in, and he was smiling now. He dropped his heavy six-guns back in their worn holsters. "Tince, I'm arresting you for the murder of Frank Hanna!"

Tension gripped the room. Attention was riveted on the big, blunt-featured miner, and Mosshead felt a surge of elation when the man went ashen under the sting of his accusation.

"No!" shouted Clemmons, raising his hand in protest. "I—"

"Thought you could put a gold trick over on an old brush-popper!" the sheriff broke in. "Throwing off suspicion by having me keep that damn gold. Knew I didn't have enough gold savvy to figure out it come from Frank's place.

"Well, it didn't work, and now you'll swing for the killings you tried to pin on Dan Rider!"

Clemmons made his play then. One hand darted under his mackinaw and came out with a snub-nosed .44. He got in the first shot, and missed in his nervous haste. He never fired another. Old Mosshead was actually smiling when his hands blurred down to his hickory-handled guns, came up with the forty-fives bucking against the heels of his hands.

His first shot slapped into the miner's belly, doubled him up. The second put a neat hole between Big Tince's eyes as he fell. The man crashed to the floor and rolled over on his back, one outflung hand siz-

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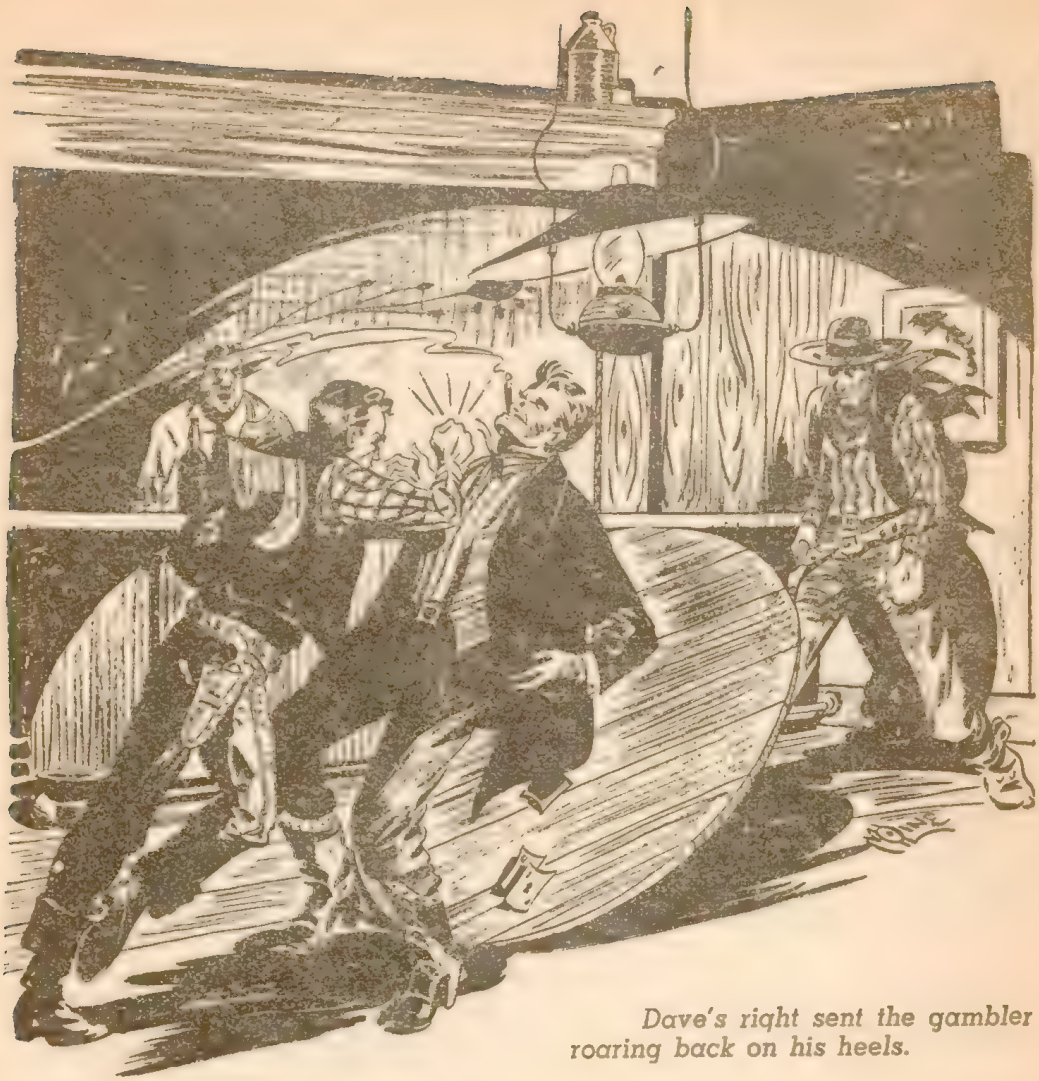

*Dave's right sent the gambler roaring back on his heels.*

# HANDCUFFS FOR THE WOLF BREED

## By Cliff Walters

*Dave Tarquinn's father had been an outlaw, wresting what he could get from people; Dave was just the opposite -- he stuck out his neck to help them. But it looked as if Dave would meet the same end as the elder Tarquinn!*

WHEN DAVE Tarquinn, a slim, wiry man astride a slim, wiry roan horse, rode into the Broken Rims, he wasn't looking for a short cut across the Frying Pan Mountains. He was looking for a grave. The grave of an out-

law known only as Tall Tark.

Dave knew about where to look in this remote land of silence and twisting coulees. He had talked to one of the men who had been in a posse that day two years ago when the solitude of the Broken Rims had been shattered by guns. That day a fierce old outlaw, his back to a rock, his smoking six-guns empty, had fallen beneath a storm of whining lead. Tark might have got away that day, they said, if he hadn't tried to cover the retreat of a wounded pard. . .

Dave Tarquinn thought he saw it now—that rock —as big as a small building; and, oddly enough, with a broken stub of steeplelike spire on one end of it. The roan horse moved in that direction. He kept looking around, pricking his ears forward. The rider's blue gaze was riveted on a little mound in the shadow of the big rock, a grass-grown mound on which bloomed a little sprig of Indian paint brush.

Dave Tarquinn swung from his saddle and stood for a moment. That moment lengthened into minutes before the roan horse emitted a low snort. Dave came out of his reverie and saw the bridled head of a slow-moving black horse coming around the corner of the big rock. Then the rider, a large man with shaggy brown hair, leaning over the horn of the saddle. The black horse, barely moving now, stopped completely. His rider groaned words barely intelligible: "Well, here I am, Tark. Back to keep. . . you company."

Dave thought the big man was drunk as, head still down, he fell off the black horse and mumbled, "Got to pull. . . that saddle off. Hills are all yours now, Nig." He tried to rise and reach the latigo.

It was then that Dave Tarquinn glimpsed the red-stained shirt of the other man. Moving forward quickly, Dave caught the sagging man, eased him to the ground and said, "I'll turn your horse loose."

A pair of feverish dark eyes blinked up, held steadily to the lean, wind-browned face of the younger man. The wounded traveler mustered the hint of a twisted smile and said, "You've got a strong ghost, Tark."

"I'm not Tark."

"I know. But I'd bet you're Tark's son. I can tell by them eyes of yourn. Light blue. . . like Injun beads. And as hard."

"And you're Tark's pard—String Smith" Dave looked at the greasy buckskin gee-string which, punched through the base of a dusty black hat crown, looped around the back of a shaggy head. "I'll go fetch some water and—"

"Too far away," came the reply. "They put too much lead in me—'fore I could shake 'em off my trail last night. Three thousand scalp money. And they let it get away." String Smith tried to grin again.

"If you don't get help—"

"I'll die anyhow. Not too unhappy . . . knowin' that you'll plant me here beside old Tark. Or I'm hopin' you will, after you've collected my scalp. Only one hitch about the money. I've got a son, too—even if he'd never admit it. Name's Roedecker, my right name. Lives over on Shell River. In debt on a little bunch of cattle. You split. . . go to bank and find about—about his note. How much— This lead in me's burnin' like hell. Hell where I'm headin' for. . . "

String Smith, born Roedecker, clutched at his chest. His talk grew wild, spasmodic. He knew again the torture of those hours when a posse had chased him. He called on Tall Tark to help him. And Tall Tark's son could only stand there helpless in the shadow of Church Rock until all was as quiet as the grave on which grew a single red flower.

* * *

IT WAS several days later when, in the middle of a hot afternoon, a slim, wiry rider jogged his roan horse into Shelltown, the ugly, dusty little settlement strewn along the bend of a badland stream. Dave Tarquinn stabled his horse and started walking up the street. Ahead he saw a sign—STOCKMEN'S BANK. He turned into a saloon, walked up to

the bar where he leaned for a moment in contemplation.

"Drink?" asked the bartender.

"I guess." Dave took the bottle, filled the muggy little glass. He didn't drink. He just stood there looking at the bank across the street. He didn't have to go over there; he hadn't had to come to Shelltown at all. But here he was, following a trail an outlaw had asked him to ride. Suddenly he swallowed the raw, fiery whisky and handed the barkeep a twenty-dollar bill.

The bartender grinned and said, "I seen you lookin' at the bank, mister. But I didn't know any cowpoke had *that* much money."

Dave pocketed his change and headed for the bank in question, a none-too-prosperous-looking institution housed in a log building with barred windows. As he entered the place, a bald, pudgy man got up from a creaking swivel chair and eyed the stranger suspiciously for a moment. The rather startled gaze of Fred Hannington, banker, seemed to focus on the old black gun slung at the stranger's hip.

"You know a man named Roedecker?" Dave asked quietly.

"Herb Roedecker—yes. You'll find his little ranch about six miles west of here."

"You do business with him?"

"Well, yeah. He owes money to the bank."

"How much?"

"Seventeen hundred and—Why do you want to know?"

"Seventeen hundred and how much? I'm here to pay that note off, if it's all right with you."

Hannington's rotund face brightened. "It's sure all right with me, mister. Things haven't been going so well with Herb lately. I'll get that note."

"And I'll pay it off on one condition."

"What's that? I *thought* there was a catch—"

"You're not to tell Roedecker who paid it, or why. You'll never know why. But my money's good, and here it is."

HANNINGTON stared for a moment, but asked no more questions. He produced a note signed by Herbert Roedecker which, for the sum of nearly eighteen hundred dollars, he marked paid, and handed over to Dave.

Dave left the bank and went back to the saloon. He wasn't in a happy frame of mind. He kept saying to himself, "You're a damned fool, Dave Tarquinn. Throwin' away eighteen hundred cash. What the hell's it to you whether a stranger named Roedecker ever got his debts paid off? Didn't Tall Tark sacrifice enough when he lost his life tryin' to protect String Smith, the grizzly that was your father, Roedecker? That three thousand reward was mine. I didn't have to play Santy Claus, split with a stranger because a dyin' outlaw, waverin' on the brink of hell, asked me to!"

Dave Tarquinn called for another drink. . . two, three of them; and decided to leave town about dusk, after his horse had rested a few hours.

Having his fourth drink about sundown, and watching a squat, thick-shouldered man loading supplies on a pack horse that was tied to the store hitching rack across the street, Dave was thinking about going to supper when a husky, well-dressed man who had been playing solitaire at a card table strolled up to the bar and said, "How about us startin' a little game of stud, stranger? The other boys'll be driftin' in pretty soon."

"Nope," said Dave flatly. "I'm travelin' as soon as I eat supper."

"Scared of losin' the rest of that twenty-dollar bill? Or did you deposit it in the bank before the best gambler that ever hit Shelltown"—Tray Trelawney's lips twisted in a smile—"could take it away from you?"

"Are *you* the best that ever hit this town?" Dave hadn't meant to sound quite so caustic. Perhaps it was his mood.

The bartender laughed. That laugh goaded the gambler who flushed and said, "I figure I'm more than a match at cards, fists or guns, for any

damned range scum that comes crawlin' into this town!"

Contempt burned in a pair of light blue eyes as Dave answered, "You'd probably know all about things that crawl, mister."

That rapierlike thrust was too much for Trelawney. He swore, moved quickly and tried to catch Dave on the point of the jaw with a savage swing. Dave didn't move much, only enough to let that blow shoot past his head. Then he ripped a vicious uppercut to the gambler's nose and sent him rocking back on his boot heels.

Trelawney elected not to rush again, try to accomplish with fists what he had failed to achieve when the element of surprise had been on his side. His right hand snagged downward and jerked free of leather the forty-five that had got him out of other scrapes. If he was a bit slow this time, perhaps it was due to the gun instinct that Dave Tarquinn had inherited from a man who now lay buried in the shadow of a big, churchlike rock up there in the Broken Rims. Dave's gun came free and its sharp, jarring voice shook all of Shelltown. A shaft of flame lanced half-way across the saloon and seemed to stab in the left side a gambler who, twisted off balance by the impact of lead, staggered and collided with the floor.

SMOKE WAS still wisping from the barrel of Dave's gun when men burst into the saloon to find out what had happened. Among them was the squat, thick-shouldered man who had been loading supplies on a pack horse tied across the street. And there was old George Summers, marshall of the little town.

The bartender said, "Tray and this feller had a few words. This feller shot Tray." Which was true. But the bartender, a friend of the gambler, wasn't helping Dave's case by such brief testimony.

Coolly Dave said, "The gambler started with fists and tried to finish up with guns. It was his idea, not mine."

"Better come with me, Mister," said the marshall. "We haven't got much of a jail here, but it'll do till Tray comes to. If he does come to. Go get the doc, Cal. And hurry up!"

Although Dave didn't protest, two volunteers accompanied him and the marshall on the walk to the little log jail at the edge of town. The prisoner was tight-lipped. Not especially angry at anyone, but bitter at the turn of events. If he were searched, if twelve hundred dollars in cash was found on his person, it would complicate matters; at least, until such time as it took to determine that he was the legal possessor of that money. In the meantime, he would be a prisoner in a little town that he had already grown to hate. Resentment burned in a pair of light blue eyes, eyes as hard as Injun beads, when Dave was thrust into an unclean, rat-infested jail that was musty and dark in the dusk that had begun to fall. But there was something to be thankful for. The marshall didn't search his prisoner.

* * *

IT WAS an hour after dark that sultry, starlit night when Dave Tarquinn heard footsteps approaching the jail. The prisoner thought he was to receive a belated supper. Then a low voice came through an aperture where chinking had fallen from between two logs: "Want to get outa that trap?"

"You know damned well I do," Dave replied.

"Would you be willin' to work a little for your freedom?"

"Maybe."

"I'm trailin' a little bunch of cattle north. I need help."

"No thanks. I'm in jam enough, without rustlin' cattle."

"These are *my* cattle, mister. Only I'm flat broke. Spent my last dollar for grub this evening. You seen me loadin' my pack horse over there by the store. Hell! Do you think I'd show up in town, and leave a bunch of stolen cattle grazin' out here six miles from town. . . in broad daylight?"

"I remember you now," Dave said,

recalling the squat, thick-shouldered man. "What's your name?"

"McBride. Jim McBride. And I lost one of my best horses to that tinhorn gambler you shot. I set in a game with him last night. I'd have shot the damned cheat myself, if I'd had a gun."

"How's that gambler now?"

"Bad shape. The doc's still workin' on him."

With the knowledge that he had shot only in self-defense, Dave thought that freedom would be the most desirable thing for him now. The only witness to the shooting had been a bartender who, apparently, was friendly with the victim of the fray. Dave said, "Start gettin' me outa here, McBride. I'll help you drive your cattle."

McBride had come prepared. A crowbar slid under the dirt-covered boards at the corner of the roof. Pretty soon the prisoner was emerging from a hole there and dropping quietly to the ground beside the husky man.

"My horse—" Dave began.

"He's tied in the willows north of town. Hell, man. I'd have freed you from that rat nest anyway. You deserve a medal, instead of jail—and maybe a long term in the pen—for shootin' Trelawney. Come on."

Dave and his companion silently left the little town. Within an hour, and by the light of a late, cloud-harrassed moon, they were rounding up a little bunch of cattle which had bedded down in a grassy swale west of town. Dave glanced up at the moon. The clouds up there were growing darker, were banking in storm formation. All of which pleased the man who had preferred herding cattle to remaining in the Shelltown jail. And if raindrops washed out tracks, that would be all right, too.

About midnight Dave had put his slicker on. McBride rode up and said, "Maybe you'd better ride on, cowboy. After all, this is pretty slow going for a man that's just broke jail."

Dave answered, "I made a bargain, McBride. And I'll keep it. At least, till I see riders comin' along our trail. After that, I'll depend on the speed of this roan."

"He looks fast, all right. Well, thanks for stayin'."

* * *

FOR SEVEN days Dave Tarquinn rode in the dust of a little herd that travelled northward. It was a tough trip, with no change of horse, and very little grub. The evening of the seventh day, fifty head of trail-weary cattle, branded with a JM, straggled toward a distant stream which was a state boundary line in this particular section.

Looking down from a little mesa, Dave had also sighted a distant town. Now he rode up to his companion and said, "You'd better take this ten-dollar bill and go buy us some grub, Mac."

"I think we'd better get them dogies across the stream while it's still light. Then I'll go."

The stream was deep and pretty swift. Yet the task of crossing the little herd had just about been completed when a drifting cottonwood, rolling along under the surface of the water, bumped against and entangled the legs of McBride's weary bay horse. The rider yelled as his horse squealed, kicked and floundered. The bay horse went down; rolling his rider off into the swift water which, a short way below the crossing, narrowed and swirled into the throat of a shallow canyon.

Dave Tarquinn moved fast to save his companion who, unable to swim, called loudly for help. There was a moment when it looked as if the luckless man would drown, but Dave and the horse came to him in time to drag him, pale and gasping, from the water. Dave immediately turned back to free, if he could, the entangled bay horse. But the bay had somehow freed himself and, trumpeting water from his nostrils, was kicking at the saddle which had turned under his belly. Dave flipped a loop in his wet lariat and caught the frightened horse.

Later, his clothes nearly dry, Mc-

Bride headed for town while Dave, sitting on the south bank of the stream, and watching cattle which had strung out to grass on the opposite side, was glad that he was so close to another state. He wished he owned a little bunch of good cattle like these. That would be start enough for any man willing to work. And he was willing. Suddenly he ground a cigarette butt under the heel of his boot. He could have bought some cattle and maybe a little land if he hadn't paid so much attention to the wishes of an old outlaw who, ripped with lead, had trailed back to the Broken Rims, back to Church Rock, to die beside the grave of another outlaw named Tall Tark.

Dave was still waiting for his companion's return when a man who had a gun in his hand and a star on his vest suddenly climbed up the steep creek bank and said, "Put your hands up, mister!"

A little stunned, Dave came to his feet as the other man continued, "Turn your back till I lift that gun of yours. Don't try any tricks. My gun's loaded and cocked!"

Dave obeyed, stood there while he was relieved of his weapon. He said flatly, "Mind tellin' me what's goin' on, Mr. Officer?"

"You're goin' to town and to jail," was the answer. "And your pard, McBride, would be goin' there with you if he wasn't already dead."

Dave swallowed hard. "You've killed McBride?"

"Not me." A pair of handcuffs were snapping around Dave's wrists. "The man that owns them cattle over there—Herb Roedecker from Shelltown—killed your pard. I don't know where you was at the time, but your pard was shot out there in midstream while he was crossin'. Him and his horse went down the canyon."

"You're crazy as hell," Dave replied. "I fished McBride outa that crick, sent him to town for grub. He wasn't dead then."

"I heard it different. Come on. We're headin' for Graystone. We'll see if you, with the help of any of your cronies, can bust outa that *stone* jail we've got there!"

THE DEPUTY sheriff, Barney Donahue, and his prisoner were close to town when they met another rider on a jaded bay horse, a squat, thick-shouldered man who had a sack of groceries tied behind his saddle.

"Well, I picked him up, Roedecker," said the officer. "Slipped down along the crick afoot and caught him asleep."

"Good," said the squat man.

"That man ain't Roedecker," said Dave Tarquinn, his voice hard, brittle. "He's the same double-crossin' skunk that I helped drive a bunch of cattle. And all the way from Shelltown. Is this the way you thank me for savin' your damned, dirty neck this evening, McBride? What's your game?"

"I know what his *name* is," said Donahue impatiently. "It's Herb Roedecker. A half a dozen people in Graystone know him."

"He's a thievin' ingrate!" Dave snapped.

"He followed a trail until he picked up his own bunch of cattle—called branded with a JM," said Donahue. "And if he killed your pard, a gent named Jim McBride, the law won't hold it against him. Well, Roedecker, now that your cattle have been run across the state line, you'd better see the authorities over there about. . . "

Talk went on while Dave sat there looking with hard, murderous eyes at a man who wouldn't return his gaze. If handcuffs hadn't been shackling Dave's wrists, he would have leaped upon that squat, heavy man and tried to tear him to pieces. But all the prisoner could do was sit there steeped in the fire of his own wrath and try to reason this thing out. Yet, with hate throbbing through his veins, reason was difficult. . . More jail bars looming ahead. Bars undeserved in the first place.

Dave said, "Where's the gun you killed McBride with, Roedecker?"

Without even hesitating, the squat man replied, "I left it back in Graystone to have it fixed. The cylinder was—"

"You haven't got a gun," Dave countered. "You'll wish you had one

if I ever ketch up with you."

"See you in a day or two, Donahue," said the man on the bay horse. "Keep this jail buster locked up tight."

"I will," the deputy promised. He motioned for Dave to ride on.

Prisoner and custodian were later riding across a pole bridge which spanned a sandy-bottomed, steep-banked creek when Dave suddenly threw spurs against his roan and forced him, with jarring impact, against the deputy's little pinto. The pinto snorted, leaped ahead. The roan, a fine "hazing" horse, leaped with him, crowding still harder under the guidance of his hand-cuffed master.

The pinto couldn't withstand that force, couldn't save himself. He went over the side of the bridge as his rider, swearing and grabbing for his gun, leaped clear of the falling horse and plunged into the shallow water below.

Dave was already whirling his roan, was leaning over the saddle horn and heading for the next state. Once, from the crest of a ridge, Dave glanced back into the deepening dusk, but he didn't see anyone in pursuit. He kept riding fast for the stream where he had saved a man's life today—only to regret it later. He regretted, too, that these handcuffs were shackling his wrists. But he was grateful that Donahue hadn't deemed it necessary to shackle a prisoner's hands behind his back, as some officers did.

IT WAS almost dark when Dave skirted a clump of cottonwoods and came into sight of the crossing. He pulled the roan to a halt, sat for a moment watching a squat man plying his spur rowels freely to a jaded, frightened horse which was refusing to enter the stream in which the animal had nearly lost its life today.

"Come on, you—" Viciously the rider applied spurs to the rearing, whirling horse.

Then, like a bolt from the dusk, another rider shot forward. A pair of long arms, bowed out at the elbows, jarred down and encircled the rider of the bay. A pair of handcuffs gouged into his throat and stifled the wild cry there.

Both riders fell in a tangle from their saddles. Spurs clanked against the ground, against the rocks of the bank, and it was man to man. If Dave had had a choice, he wouldn't have elected to fight such an adversary in such a manner—at such close quarters. That adversary, built close to the ground, was strong as a bull. And he was fghting with the furious desperation of a cornered animal. He could use his hands. And he did, with savage industry. Yet, with all his strength, his threshing about, he couldn't break or shake the hold of those rawhide arms about his twisted, straining neck

In desperation he began to use his knees against Dave's body, and the tall man felt as if a horse were kicking him. He began using his own knees, meting out the same brutal punishment that he himself was absorbing. If weight advantage was with his opponent in this fierce struggle, Dave's toughness, determination and unleashed anger were formidable factors.

A sharp rock tore the back of Dave's neck as the other man gained temporary triumph. And there was an instant when sickening pain shot through Dave Tarquinn, an instant when he felt that his ribs would collapse under the onslaught of crushing fists and knees. Yet, grogged by that punishment, he refused to release the hold he had first clamped on the neck of his antagonist.

Perhaps it was the wolf strain in him, the strain inherited from a man known to the world as Tall Tark, that carried Dave through that almost unbearable moment. With desperate strength he fought his way from under. Then, inflicting punishment every step of the way, he maneuvered his opponent toward the stream and forced him into the water.

"No!" gasped the man who had nearly lost his life in this cold water today.

"Yes!" Dave gritted, fighting toward deeper water.

That move turned the tide of victory toward Dave. Seconds later he

dragged a choking, half-drowned man from the stream. Then he said, "Tell me straight—are you McBride or Roedecker?"

"Roedecker!" came the blubbering answer.

"Why are you stealin' your own cattle?"

"So that damned banker at Shelltown couldn't foreclose on me and grab 'em."

"Anything else to say before I drag you back there and drown you?" Dave wasn't sure he had strength enough left to do any dragging. "I might as well. I'll be goin' back to jail at Shelltown anyhow."

"No!" Roedecker gasped. "I lied about that gambler you shot. He wasn't bad hurt. He don't want you comin' back to Shelltown. He ain't preferrin' charges against you. They was goin' to turn you loose anyhow. I just thought—"

"You seen a chance, you damned scum, to get some free work done. Make me a party to your scheme of takin' mortgaged cattle outa the state. Is that it?"

"Yeah, that's it. But now I'll go to Graystone with you. Tell Donahue the truth if you—"

"You don't have to do that!" growled a voice from the darkness.

DAVE GLANCED around, saw Barney Donahue stepping from behind a cottonwood. The deputy went on, "I'll unlock them cuffs, Tarquinn. I wished, when you bumped me and my horse off that bridge, that them cuffs had been locked around your neck. I've changed my mind about that now. I'm glad you had the guts to lock 'em around Roedecker's neck!" A little key twisted and Dave gratefully felt of his aching, bleeding wrists.

"I've got some dry matches in my saddle pocket," said Dave, looking around for his horse which was grazing nearby. "I think I'll build a fire and dry out."

"Better help me take Roedecker to town." Donahue grinned. "Seems like I need help gettin' a prisoner there."

"Nope," Dave answered, getting matches from his saddle. "I'll stay here near my cattle, if it's all right with you."

"*Your* cattle," Roedecker growled. "They'll be mine. After you give me a bill of sale for 'em. Just to—shall we say—square up the wages you owe me?"

"A bill of sale for mortgaged cattle won't do you no good," Barney Donahue said.

"But you'll give it to me, won't you, Roedecker?" Dave said. "Or will I drag you back in the crick again?"

"Write it out!" Roedecker said.

Dave wrote it by the light of a little fire just starting to burn. Roedecker signed it; and Donahue, saying it was worthless, witnessed it.

"It would be worthless—if it wasn't for this little slip of paper here." Dave brought out the cancelled note the Shelltown banker had given him.

Roedecker looked at that note, blinked stupidly and said, "How come that a stranger goes around payin' off other people's notes?"

"I'd tell you that," said Dave, "if it wasn't for shieldin' the respect of a man that was worth ten like you. A man that couldn't stoop to double-crossin' another man that had saved his life once. I wouldn't want him twistin' over in his grave because folks had found out he was any relation to you."

"I'll get them cattle back!" Roedecker said.

"You will like hell!" cut in Barney Donahue. Then, gazing across a stream in which the reflection of the first pale stars had started to dance—looking over into the next state, the deputy added, "Damn! I wish I had a nice little bunch of cattle like that, Tarquinn. All in the clear."

"It's a start," Dave answered. But he wasn't seeing the star reflections dancing on the water. Nor was he seeing the dark shapes of cattle beyond that stream. He was seeing a pair of graves, one of them with a bright red Indian paint brush blossom on it, back there in the serenity and solitude of that rocky wilderness which men called the Broken Rims.

# WILD WEST QUIZ

## By Idaho Bill

Turn to Page 92 for Answers

1. In the rough, lawless days of the West, a *necktie party* was a jocular name applied to
   a Saturday night dance
   church going
   a hanging
   a wedding

2. Besides being a sure-fire proposition, a *cinch* is also
   a part of the saddle
   a species of bedbug
   a tight squeeze
   a cowboy's hat

3. As far as we know, cattle were first brought to this country by the
   Spanish
   Dutch
   English
   French

4. The *cayuse*, indispensable on the ranch, is most generally used for
   bailing hay
   building fences
   riding the range
   skinning cows

5. When a westerner speaks of his hogleg, he means his
   breakfast bacon
   pistol holster
   wolf traps
   good luck piece

6. *Chaparajos*, indispensable to the cowboy, is just another name for
   saddle blankets
   spurs
   leather gloves
   leather pants

7. *Calf slobbers* is an old range nickname for
   water
   milk
   rice
   pie-filling

8. *Maverick* is a name most generally applied to
   a lonesome cowboy
   a sorry horse
   an unbranded yearling
   a desert plant

9. A good synonym for the cowboy's *slicker* is
   hunting knife
   razor
   raincoat
   curry comb

10. *Sombreros* are most commonly used by westerners to
    bake bread on
    water cattle in
    sleep on
    cover the head

### What Do You Think?

1. .....
2. .....
3. .....
4. .....
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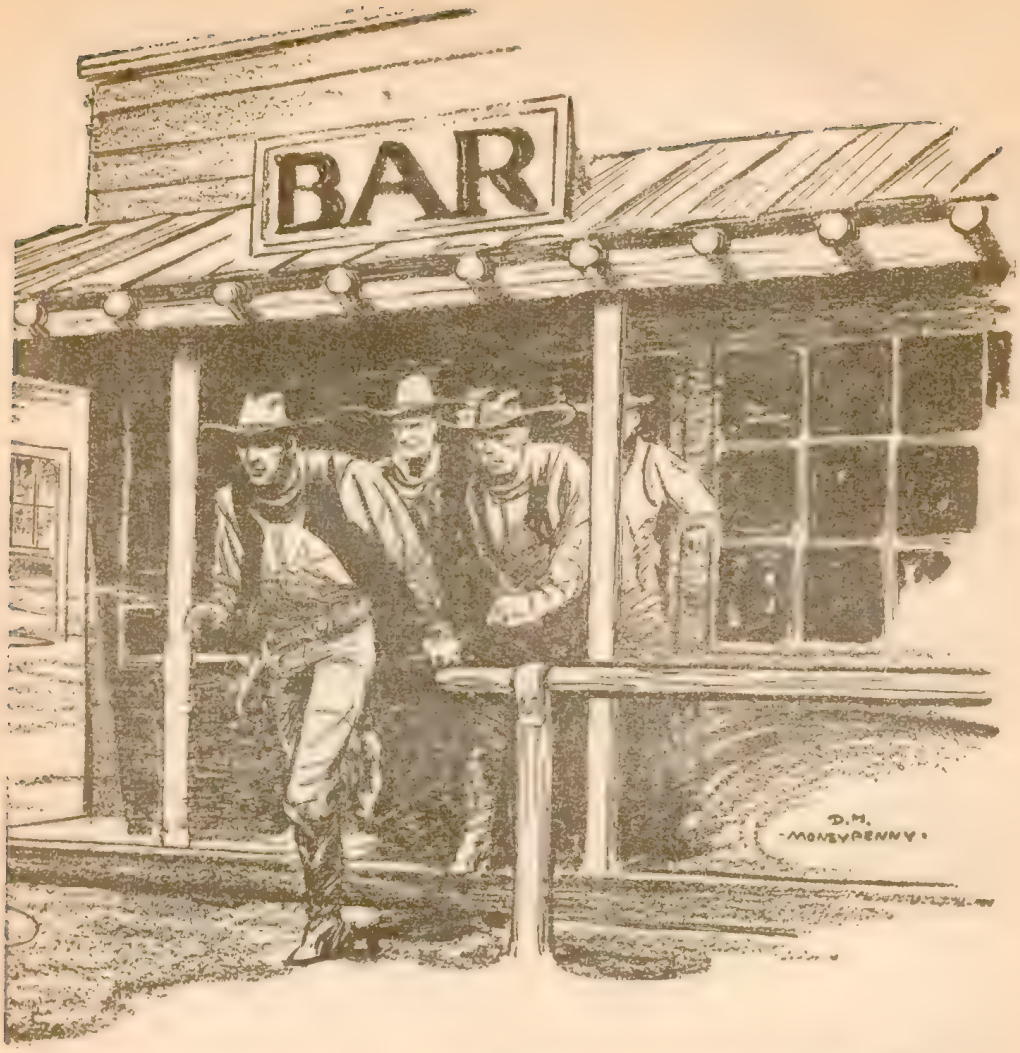
10. .....




# HELL ROARING HOLIDAY

## By Cliff Campbell

*All Comanche waited for Deputy Webb to call the notorious Wes Hardin. A true story of the Old West.*

THE CROWD in the saloon shifted restlessly, and quiet settled over them. They stepped clear of Wes Hardin to give him plenty of room. Hardin tested out his gun, made sure it wouldn't stick in the holster, then walked through the batwing doors of Wright's Saloon, on

the north end of the square in Comanche, down in Texas. There, he stood and waited for Charlie Webb, the deputy from adjoining Brown county.

Hardin was a pleasant looking young fellow, just twenty-one this day. He was light complexioned and had hard, blue eyes that could soften quickly in a friendly grin. But already, this pleasant looking boy had nearly twenty notches on his guns. His nearly six feet of height carried his hundred and sixty-five pounds well.

It was a gala day in town, that twenty-sixth of May, in 1874, and Comanche was crowded. Everybody was there; everybody was celebrating. The big day had been well advertised by the business element. There were races at the track, and Wes Hardin had won over three thousand dollars. He was spending it lavishly. It was his birthday.

Deputy Sheriff Charlie Webb had ridden in a couple of hours earlier. He had about twenty well armed men with him and these gun-slingers stayed close together, their eyes watchful. Talk ran wild that Webb was going to arrest the notorious John Wesley Hardin; he had bragged that if Sheriff Carnes of Comanche, here in Comanche County was afraid to arrest Hardin, he, Charlie Webb sure was not. And he'd do it, too. He was going to get the young outlaw, claim an old reward on him.

Wes Hardin's friends and a crowd of his relatives shot back that if Hardin needed help, he sure as hell was going to get plenty of it. The outlook was for a stormy day—gunsmoke. Every man in the big crowd in Comanche was set for the coming rukus. It was the main topic of conversation. Some favored Webb; others stood behind Wes Hardin.

CHARLIE WEBB, heavy shouldered, powerful, his legs a bit bowed came across the dusty square slowly. His head was down, his chin almost touching his vest, but his keen eyes were busy, beneath their bushy eyebrows. He missed nothing that went on about him and his two guns were ready, well to the front on his thighs.

He came abreast of Hardin, where he stood on the porch of the saloon with Jim Taylor on one side of him and Bud Dixon, his cousin on the other side. "Are you Sheriff Charlie Webb, of Brown County?" Wes Hardin snapped at him.

Webb stopped, stared for a moment. "What if I am?" he snarled. "I'm Deputy Sheriff of Brown County."

"You looking for me, like I hear you been bragging?" Hardin asked.

"Who the hell are you?" Webb came back.

"I'm that hell-for-leather gunfighter, John Wesley Hardin. Now don't deny you ever heard of *me*," Hardin yelled.

Webb stood unmoved, calm. He was sizing up Hardin with sharp eyes. Neither of these men had ever met before.

'I hear you been making talk you're going to get me, Webb. How about that?"

Before Webb could reply, Judge Thurmond, a friend of his called, "Charlie, come on over here a minute."

Hardin snapped, "Keep your rope out of this, Judge. I got something to settle with this polecat."

Webb started to move off and Hardin yelled, "Hold on, you son."

Charlie Webb took a couple of steps, put a cigar in his mouth, lit it. Then he wheeled. "Don't think I'm scared of you, Hardin," he yelled. His hands shot to his guns, snapped them out of their cut-down holsters.

HARDIN'S gun came out of a holster sewed to his vest, with the speed of light. His slug took Charlie Webb in the face. Budd Dixon and Jim Taylor, on Hardin's right and left, fired with him. All three bullets hit Webb. He went down on one knee, rested his gun arm on the other, tried a last shot. It went wild. He fell over, dead. Hardin had a slight wound in his thigh—nothing that counted.

Wes Hardin and his two men stood fast on the porch, their guns

ready. At first, the crowd scattered in a panic. Then others came running from all directions. Most of them had their guns drawn. Talk ran high. Webb's friends yelled, "Lynch 'em! They've gone too far, this time. Lynch 'em!" Everybody in the street was yelling at once. The uproar was terrific. A heavy pall of dust rose over everything.

Sheriff Carnes came charging through the crowd with a shot gun. He jumped to the porch. "Hold on, men. Hold on, now! This is a job for the law," he yelled repeatedly. His shot gun held them for a few minutes, but not for long. Mob feeling was running high.

Hardin's friends, Anderson, Taylor and Dixon pushed him back inside the saloon. They threw their guns on the crowd in there and lined them up, facing a wall of the place.

Wes Hardin issued his orders calmly, like a company commander in battle. "We'll get out of here," he said steadily. "I don't like mobs. If it was one man. Or even two or three . . . But a mob. . . I don't like it. Get out the side door, there. Streak for the horses. Ride for my place. Dixon, take another man and cover our get-away."

Hardin, Anderson and Taylor led the way. Well placed shots from the rear guard, covering the withdrawal, broke up the rushing mob which had swept past Sheriff Carnes.

Taking advantage of the flurry, Hardin led three of his men out of town at a full run. Dixon and Anderson got out behind them, firing rapidly into the mob to delay them. They all headed for Hardin's ranch, four miles from Comanche.

Everybody rushed for horses, took up the pursuit at full speed. Sheriff Carnes and his deputies stormed into the galloping mob, yelling for order, pleading with the excited men to let the law take its course. Nobody paid any attention.

The chase went full tilt, in a cloud of dust, for a couple of miles. Then, with many empty saddles proving the good marksmanship of Hardin's rear guard and with Carnes' pleas ringing in their ears incessantly, the pursuit slackened broke up. But Charlie Webb's friends swore that they would kill Hardin and his friends before morning.

Wes Hardin and his men knew it would be suicide to stay at the Hardin ranch. They lit out at once on fresh horses for the wild, rugged hills back of Comanche. Here, it was almost impossible for riders to surprise them—even find them.

FOR A short time, Hardin was safe. Then, made bold by their safety, his two cousins, Bud and Tom Dixon started back to the Hardin ranch near Comanche. They were promptly lynched by one of the mobs that were riding the country, night and day looking for the Hardins. Hamilton Anderson, who had been with Wes in the Comanche trouble, met the same fate. Young Joe Hardin was lynched a little later.

Then, at last, Hardin fully realized the intensity of the feeling that had been stirred up against him by this latest killing, the death of Charlie Webb. He considered the situation from all sides, calmly. There was only one thing to do—run from the country. A man couldn't live long, if everyone was against him.

Jim Taylor was still with him.

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Hardin was his hero—the greatest man in the whole state of Texas, from his twisted viewpoint. The two men rode out of the hills, travelling south. Dropping down into a big valley, it looked as though they had the whole country to themselves. There was not a rider in sight.

Hardin and Taylor headed for the Mexican border at an extended gallop. Presently, a low hill was in their path. As they ran over its crest, Hardin suddenly pulled up, cursed softly. "Look!" he growled, pointing south.

"Uhuh. Bad! What'll we do?"

A mob of nearly a hundred riders was sweeping up the slope from the south, toward them.

WES HARDIN said nothing for a moment. Then suddenly, he wheeled, pointed. Taylor too, wheeled. Another gang of riders were charging at a gallop, from the north. The two outlaws were in a trap, caught between these forces. Each of the big posses had seen them. Their savage yells came plainly to Hardin's ears. It looked as if the notorious John Wesley Hardin was about to end his dashing career in the south west on the end of a rope, at last.

Taylor moved impatiently. "Well, we gotta do something quick," he said quietly. "We better. . . . " Wes Hardin held up his hand and Jim Taylor fell silent. Hardin had a leg hooked over the horn of his saddle. He studied the situation for a moment. He was weighing his plan of campaign calmly, like a good soldier on the field of battle. His keen, clear mind was working swiftly. Taylor, trusting his hero implicitly, sat quiet, said nothing.

When the gang coming from the south was well within rifle shot, Wes Hardin snapped out of his study. "Come on, Jim. Follow me. Do as I do. Watch me, now," he ordered. He fed steel to his bronc and headed at a run straight for the posse coming from the north, firing his six-guns as he ran.

The mob coming from the south topped the hill behind the two outlaws. But they could not fire a shot; they would have been shooting squarely into the other posse. Neither posse could fire, for that reason. Wes Hardin's keen mind had seen the value of this strategy. He was carrying it through with straightforward courage and action.

When the two outlaws were almost among the north posse, they pulled their horses to a rearing halt, wheeled and raced for the mob coming behind them. Still, neither posse dared fire a shot.

"We're goin' through. Make your shells count," Wes Hardin shouted. Half a dozen jumps behind, the north posse came on at a full run after them. The other group charged down the hill toward them.

Then, Hardin and Taylor were among the south posse like a cyclone, firing and yelling.

The two gangs ran together head on, in a wild mix-up of riders. The tangle was so tight that none of the possemen could use their weapons. Horses collided at full speed. Many went down, were trampled.

The confusion gave Wes Hardin and Taylor a good start. In less than five miles they were clean away, lost to sight of the mobs. Neither one of them had been hit by the storm of lead that was flung at them, as soon as they got clear of the mob.

For days, they dodged and hid. The whole country was after them. But at last, they shook off pursuit completely.

Jim Taylor having been taken sick, Hardin left him with a relative. Wes wanted to get back to Comanche if possible and get his wife and two children away from there with him. And this he did, despite the terrible hazards of the trip.

He went to New Orleans. Then he took his family to Florida by boat, and here, he went into the saloon business. For the time at least, he was safe. He had changed his name to Swain. Nobody knew him, nor his blazing record.

(THE END)

# MAN HUNTER

## By C. C. Staples

*The instinct of the lawman isn't something that dies away when an ex-Ranger hangs up his guns, and Big Zeb couldn't help hitting the trail of the stagecoach bandits — even when his wife's life was at stake!*

### A Complete Novelet

THERE WAS a heavy frown on Big Zeb Winters' face, and he rode with his chin almost down on his wide chest. Partly because of the terrible problem that he faced at home, partly because he was forced to sell the six fine Steeldust colts that he led, close tied together by three foot halter-shanks. His heart was as heavy as though he was riding to the funeral of an old friend. These colts were mighty dear to the horse-loving heart of him.

The trail led south in a straight line toward narrow, steep Borico pass, and it was here that he was to meet Park Fraser and his riders, bound back from Two Arrows to his big rich spread, deliver the colts and collect the money for them.

Big Zeb raised his gray eyes for a quick glance ahead. The jackpine-covered hills where Borico pass started its climb through the mountains, loomed close. Only about a mile ahead. Zeb's hands went to the well worn butts of his two forty-fives, lifted the Winchester a bit in its scabbard under his leg. Borico pass had been a favorite hold-up spot for outlaws, for years.

He swiped the mop of black hair off his forehead, pulled his flat topped black Stetson down lower over bleak gray eyes that missed no detail of the hills of the pass.

All this was pure habit, a relic of his years as a Texas Ranger, before he resigned to get married and take up ranching, here in Arizona.

He was coming in off the desert at the head of a long tail of dust, in full view of anyone among the jack pines. And those six fine sons of the famous Kentucky stallion, Steeldust, that he led, would be a temptation to any widelooper. But back of him, back at the ranch—there lay his most desperate worry.

* * *

Only two weeks before, old Doc Stiles had ridden out from Two Arrows, ten miles to the east. He had cornered Zeb in the barn and told him about his wife, Mary; told him everything, sparing him nothing. That bad fall from her bronc, weeks before—it had broken something inside. Unless Mary could be sent east, and soon, for a special operation, she would never see another spring on this range, and young Zeb, and Ann the baby, would be motherless.

Next day Big Zeb had gone to see paunchy little Joe Artz the banker in Two Arrows, seeking a loan on his ranch, trying at any cost to get the money he had to have for Mary. Well, thinking it over calmly later, he couldn't blame Joe for turning him down. His spread was gutted by drought, wasn't worth much as security for the money Zeb wanted.

As a last resort, his mind had gone to those six fine Steeldust colts. They were his pride and joy, but they were his last hope. He had ridden over to see big, kindly Park Fraser of the Circle Star iron. Old Park had coveted the colts ever since Zeb drove them in from down Texas way a year before, when beef was high, crops good. Park's offer

*Zeb opened fire as the outlaws came in on the run.*

would bring the money Zeb must have to save Mary's life.

BIG ZEB pulled his horse down to a lope, turned him a bit west of the pass, to get the cover of a spur that branched into the desert from the hills. He couldn't afford to take chances. If any outlaws were laying for him, had seen him coming, they would have to change position now. Zeb might see them.

Nothing happened; no one challenged him as he came in off the desert and loped in among the pines. The stage road through the pass, where he was to meet Park Fraser and turn over the colts, was close ahead. Zeb pulled down to a walk. Then abruptly, he set his mount back

on his haunches as the horse whickered loudly, his ears up, his head swung to the west.

Big Zeb sat for a minute, his six-guns in his hands, his eyes busy. Fraser wouldn't be back here, off the road, surely. But there were horses near; that was sure. He urged his mount ahead. Then, down off the trail in a hollow he saw four saddled, sweat and dust covered broncs. A deep breath of relief gusted from between his teeth. Maybe, after all, these were Fraser's horses, waiting here in the shade.

But suddenly, suspicion strong in his law-man brain, he pulled up, swung south a bit and forced his mount into the middle of a thick clump of pines. They were well out of sight of the dust covered broncs. He led the colts in too, and tied them to a stout branch. Caution, the old instinct of the man hunter, flooded over him. Those four horses all had different brands, and none of them bore Fraser's Circle Star brand.

At that instant, up ahead, in the direction of the stage road, Zeb heard a loud, roaring mule-like laugh that ended with a deep, growling intake of breath. He tensed, ran a hand through his thick black hair, listened. His mind again swung back to his Ranger days. Where had he heard that peculiar sound before? Somewhere. Somewhere in that fading past he had heard just such a laugh. Instinctively, he knew it meant danger. He thought hard, but the answer eluded him.

Big Zeb paused only a minute trying to place that laugh, then he sneaked up onto a point where he could see down on the stage road.

FRASER was nowhere in sight, probably had been detained for a time, in town. But his first glance showed him two men about a hundred yards away, sitting in the brush at the edge of the road. They were smoking calmly and one a burly scar-faced hombre roared out that same loud rumbling laugh at something, as Zeb looked.

That laugh again. Zeb knew that he should know this big hombre. But somehow, he couldn't place him. And certainly, these were not Park Fraser's riders. Something wrong here.

Then suddenly, he saw it all. "The danged skunks! Fixin' to hold up the stage, carryin' the payroll for the mines. It always goes out at about this time," he thought. "Well, we'll see about that." His face was grim and taut. There was a glint as of old in his gray eyes as he crawled carefully forward for a better look. He made no sound. His move had all the smooth stealthy menace of a puma that crouches over its prey, ready for its deadly spring.

This layout before him was mighty familiar. He knew that the other two outlaws must be close, a definite part of the picture. Zeb's colts were safe, for the time. The hold-ups evidently were in no fear of interruption. Maybe they had a sentry out. Zeb wondered briefly about that.

He knew that this hold-up was in reality no business of his, that first and foremost he should make sure of selling those colts, for Mary's sake But he was in a good commanding position—and once a law-man, the instinct to fight lawlessness was hard to down. Besides, Arizona was his country now and as a good citizen it was his duty to defend it, stamp out crime.

Zeb didn't need much urging, but anyway this thought was his excuse to go ahead with something that was mighty strong in his make-up.

He sized up the situation with a sureness born of long practice at stalking men. There was no doubt in his mind about what those two men down by the road were planning, and the cool way they acted showed that they were old hands at this game. Might even be a reward on some of them. That would help. Might not have to sell his colts to Park Fraser, if he could knock down a chunk of reward money.

He searched the sides of the pass carefully with his eyes. Finally he picked up sun-glint on polished metal, saw a man farther up the pass about a hundred yards from the road.

This one sat with his Winchester across his knees. There would probably be another one on the slope across the road or somewhere near, but he couldn't make him out. The thought worried him. This extra man that he couldn't find; he was like a wild deuce in the deck, in the game that Big Zeb was playing—a deuce that might take the pot. But when a man gambles with his life he has to take chances.

HE'D LET these jaspers take all the risk of facing the deadly guns of Red Jung, the stage guard. Easier to get them all when the stage had been stopped and this had their attention. Then, just at the right instant he'd go into action with his saddle gun. Simple. They were outlaws—fair game, even from ambush. No closed season on outlaws. He walked back to his horse, pulled his thirty-thirty Winchester from its scabbard, came back and took up a good position. It would be fifteen minutes before the stage would reach the pass. He hunkered down out of sight and waited.

As he waited his thoughts went back to the ranch, to Mary. She was so brave about everything. Always cheerful when he was home, always trying to encourage him even though she knew her desperate condition. But, twice when he had dropped in unexpectedly he had caught her crying in a hopeless, heartbroken way. The thought of those two occasions just about drove him crazy every time they came into his mind. He was half inclined to pull out with the colts and leave the stage to its fate, but something stronger than himself held him. The old man-hunter instinct.

Squatting there on the point above Borico pass, Big Zeb suddenly heard the rasp and grind of wheels on the rocky road. His pulse jumped slightly. He levered the chamber of his rifle half open to make sure it was loaded. This move had long ago become habit with the big ex-Ranger, in tight situations. He seldom left anything to chance.

Zeb knew that the stage would not come into sight until it reached a spot a few hundred yards from where the two hold-ups waited, down beside the road. He saw all three of the outlaws get ready. They pulled their bandannas up over their faces, to their eyes. The two near the road stamped out their cigarettes and one, a squat, swarthy hombre ran across to the other side into the brush.

It was a worry to Zeb's mind that he couldn't find the fourth of these owlhoots. There were four saddled horses back in the hollow. Had to be four men up here somewhere. The other one was probably on the other side of the pass. Zeb let it go at that. No time now to look for him.

HE HEARD the crack of a whip, the jangle of trace chains. The lead horses of the stage team rushed into sight, running for a start at the grade through the pass.

Zeb flattened his big lean body on the ground, his gray eyes lined the sights of his saddle gun on the man sitting up in the brush. There was the real danger spot for Red Jung, the guard. That rifleman must be eliminated if he got into action.

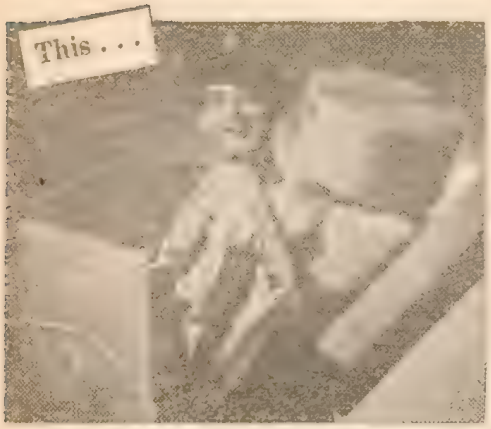
A real exaltation ran over Zeb. This was like the old Ranger days. Excitement. Action. This was more like life should be. His finger was on the trigger, he had taken up the slack when a voice to his right rear drawled slowly, "Hold it feller."

Big Zeb froze for an instant. This man behind him would be the fourth of the hold-up men. Zeb cursed himself for not having taken time to locate him earlier. Too late now. He took a quick look over his shoulder; a big, tough looking hombre was crouching, ten feet away on the thick carpet of pine needles. Both of his six-guns were in his hands, the hammers eared back. The man was blonde, had large blue eyes set in a face that would have looked honest except that his eyes were placed too close on either side of a big red nose. He spoke with a flat toned southern drawl.

"Leave that rifle lay, feller, and crawl back here a piece. Don't stand

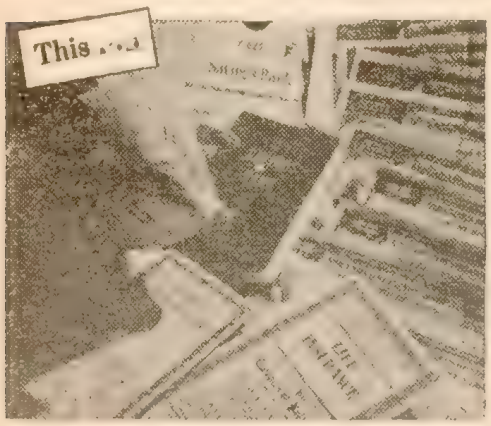
(Continued On Page 71)

# What you do with your money can wreck you (*and your Uncle Sam*)




**BUY, BUY, BUY!** Foolish people are doing it, *overdoing* it. But sensible folks know that with every needless purchase—or every time you patronize a black market or buy above ceiling—you do your bit to force prices up all along the line. That's the way inflation gets a boost.

**IT CAN HAPPEN HERE**—again! Today, with fewer goods in the stores while incomes are high, the danger of inflation is greater than ever. Inflation is always followed by depression. What can you do to head off another depression? Buy nothing you do not really—*really*—have to have . . . today.




**SAVE, SAVE, SAVE!** That's the way to make America good for the boys to come home to. Pay up debts, put money in life insurance, savings bank, War Bonds. Every cent you save now, helps to keep prices down—and when the war is won you'll have use for that nest egg you've laid away.

**A HOME OF YOUR OWN,** a better farm, a real vacation, something to retire on—these are things worth saving for. Store up your money now while prices are high. There's a time to splurge and a time to save: today, while money's coming in, is a good time—the *right* and patriotic time—to SAVE!

**4 THINGS TO DO to keep prices down and help avoid another depression**

1. Buy only what you really need.
2. When you buy, pay no more than ceiling prices. Pay your ration points in full.
3. Keep your *own* prices down. Don't take advantage of war conditions to ask more for your labor, your services, or the goods you sell.
4. *Save.* Buy and hold all the War Bonds you can—to help pay for the war, protect *your own* future! Keep up your insurance.

A United States War message prepared by the War Advertising Council; approved by the Office of War Information; and contributed by this magazine in cooperation with the Magazine Publishers of America.

(Continued From Page 69)

up," the man growled. "Don't aim to have the stage guard see yuh."

Zeb knew that only a fool would take a chance under these conditions. All his plans were crumbling about him. His Steeldust colts. . . Mary. . . But there was no help for it now; he didn't have a chance. He got to his knees and moved back as directed. In among the pines, out of sight of the stage road, the man ordered, "Git on yore feet, feller. Keep yore hands up. Don't make no fast moves or I'll let yuh have it, stage or no stage."

Big Zeb climbed slowly to his feet. The outlaw jammed a gun in his back and lifted his two six-guns. Zeb realized that this hombre probably would have drilled him first and talked later if it hadn't been for the fact that he didn't want to put Red Jung and the stage driver on their guard by firing his six-guns.

He heard the screech of brakes as the stage came to a stop, then heard it drive on up the pass. No shots were fired. The outlaws had no doubt gotten the drop on Red Jung.

THEN HIS captor spoke again. "All right, feller. Git movin'. Walk back there toward the hosses. Say, what was you aimin' to do up there on the point, anyhow? Ain't a law-man, are yuh now?"

"No, I'm no law-man. And what yuh don't know about why I was back there won't hurt yuh. What yuh goin' to do with me?"

"I ain't goin' to do nothin'. I'm takin' yuh back to see what Scar wants to do with yuh, when he an' Pedro git back from stoppin' the stage. I'd hate to be in yore socks, feller, when Scar. . . ."

"Hey! Dixie! Where yuh at?" came a loud hail from the draw, down below the spur where Zeb and his captor walked.

"Up here in the pines, Scar. Caught a feller tryin' to cut himself in on our game, bit ago. I got 'im right here," Dixie yelled back. He turned to Zeb. "Stay where yuh are, feller. One fast move an' I'll let yuh have it, sure." He lunged over to the edge of the spur, looked down into the draw. Turning his head slightly, Zeb could see Dixie's shadow. He watched it closely.

"Come on, Dix. Come on!" Scar yelled from below, in his booming voice. "What's holdin' yuh? We got no time to lose."

"What'll I do with this feller I got?"

"Hell! Beef 'im, yuh fool. He seen us all, didn't he? Beef 'im! Come on. Hurry up."

Zeb saw Dixie's shadow wheel quickly, his arm start up. He ducked low, made a wild jump for a clump of jack pines. Dixie's gun roared. At the same instant Zeb's brain seemed to explode in a wild shower of stars. The ground tilted up steeply in his face. He hit face down and lay still.

Some time later Big Zeb slowly drifted back from the shadows. He was still lying face downward. The sun was well over in the west. He realized that he had been out for a couple of hours. The first thought that came into his head was, "I muffed this like a pilgrim from the east. Fine thing for a Ranger to do. If I had only located that fourth outlaw. . . ."

* * *

His mind shifted to his colts. Briefly, he was worried, but soon relaxed. The outlaws would be in too much of a hurry to bother with them, even if they found them. They wouldn't want to be held back by a bunch of colts.

He sat up slowly, his head spinning, and put a hand to his wound. It came away covered with blood. His head ached, bad. A slug from the hold-up's gun had plowed through his scalp along his skull, stunning him. He realized that, but for his crouching jump, that slug would probably have gone through between his shoulders.

Zeb staggered to his feet. His hands dropped to his empty holsters automatically. He stood listening for a moment, heard nothing. The four outlaws had evidently not wasted

any time getting away from Borico pass. They knew as well as Zeb did that it wouldn't be long before Sheriff Glazer and a strong posse would be charging across country from Two Arrows hot on their trail, when the stage driver reported the hold-up.

Zeb staggered out to the point and found his rifle was still there. He made his way to his horse, hidden in the jack pine thicket. And even before he got there he sensed that something was wrong. He shoved into the pines at a staggering run. Then he came to a sharp halt. His horse was still there, but the colts were gone. And with them, his last chance to get the money he needed so badly.

ZEB STOOD numbly for a moment, cursing savagely, then he rammed his Winchester into the saddle scabbard, swung up, drove in his spurs and went at a run down out of the pines. But he was weak and dizzy from his wound, and at last he had to give up and turn toward home. He'd have to get a bandage on his head, rest for a while, get a stimulant to snap him out of this spell. Give up? Big Zeb Winters had never quit the trail of an outlaw in his grown life, once he was put on it. No, he was out to get those outlaws, come high water or hell. He had to get his colts back.

When he rode into the yard and stepped down at the front gallery, Mary came out of the house. Then she stopped, her hand went to her heart. "Zeb! You're hurt!" She stood looking at his head as he took off his hat. "How did it happen, Zeb?" she cried. "Let me wash your wound and put a bandage on it. I'll get you a drink."

"I just got creased, that's all. Don't amount to nothing. Got a terrible headache from it, though. Stage got held up. I was mixed up in it. Fix me up and pack me a lunch. I'm going after them outlaws. Got to catch them."

Mary was small, slender, blonde. "But why, Zeb?" she asked. "You're not a Ranger now. You just leave outlaw hunting to Sheriff Glazer. He'll be after them with a posse as soon as he hears about the hold-up. No need for you to risk your life, and. . . ."

"Mary," Zeb interrupted, "there's a special reason why I must get those outlaws. A mighty important reason to all of us. They stole our Steeldust colts. I got to get them back. I got to, that's all. Now, I've got to get my other two six-guns from the trunk. Maybe I'm a fool —my wound and all, but I never yet gave up, once I started after an outlaw. I can't begin now."

A HALF HOUR later, his head bandaged, most of the shock of his wound gone, Big Zeb rode out of the corral on a fresh mount, a long coupled gray with plenty of bottom in his make-up. He headed for Borico pass. In his saddlebags was a good lunch and in his pockets he carried a supply of forty-five shells for his six-guns and some thirty-thirties for his rifle.

As he was stowing his lunch, he found a big ball of strong fish line in his saddlebags, left there when he got back from a fishing trip to the Verde River a month ago. He was about to throw it out, then put it back in the bag. Never could tell when a piece of strong cord would come in handy.

At the pass he found the wreck of the Wells Fargo strong box beside the road. The outlaws' trail was plain. They had been in too much of a hurry evidently, to take the trouble to hide their tracks.

Big Zeb hit out at once on their trail, skirting low rolling foothills covered with mesquite and jack pines. He travelled fast but paused on every rise to scan the country ahead carefully. His back trail, too received a careful search at every stop.

The sign led straight for the vast malpais country, across the ford of the Verde River, to the southeast. Many an outlaw had holed up in that wild country, safe from the law. If this bunch made it into that place, his colts were gone for good.

He pulled up on a slope bordering rough, rocky hills on his right. Then the gray hit the trail down hill, running smoothly. Smell of freshly turned dust was strong in Zeb's nostrils. The outlaws, held back by the colts they were leading, couldn't be far ahead. But night was coming on fast. The sun was well down behind the hills to his right.

He had nearly reached the bottom of the slope, was pulling the horse down to a lope for the climb ahead when four riders broke from a thick clump of mesquite about two hundred yards down to his left and came for him at a run. The bull voice of one of them yelled, "Hold up, you! Hold up or I'll blast yuh." Zeb recognized the four outlaws who had held up the stage. It was Scar, the big hombre with the loud voice, that peculiar laugh who had hailed him.

The four riders fanned out to cross their fire on him if he showed fight. He knew at once that the man Dixie, who had wounded him would recognize him if they got any closer. None of the others had seen him, back at the pass. But once Dixie got close enough to recognize him for certain they would not hesitate to kill him. He was the only witness to the hold-up; the only one who had seen them unmasked. He would be no match for four expert gunmen, all coming at him at once.

Slugs whined around him, kicked up the dust ahead. The gray flattened out in a full run. Zeb didn't waste any shells shooting at the outlaws. A hit, shooting from a running horse would be just luck, and it looked as if he'd need all his ammunition mighty soon. He was helping the horse all he could, riding the stirrups, flattened down over the animal's neck.

A GLANCE over his shoulder told him that he was holding his lead. He wasn't gaining, but neither were the outlaws. This trail, spread over a great half circle to the southeast, ended at the only ford in the Verde river, the ford the outlaws would likely use to reach the great malpais country beyond, and safety from pursuit by law-men. There was the spot where Zeb planned his fight to recover the colts.

The trail was skirting the foothills closely. Zeb took another look over his shoulder from a rise of ground. The outlaws would certainly have to give up the chase soon, go back to where they had hidden the six Steeldust colts. They surely would not abandon that loot. Those colts would bring big money, anywhere.

The gray was still running with a full, free stride, his breathing deep and regular. He was skirting a rocky, steep sloping range of hills to his right. Lead was buzzing about him angrily. Suddenly, the horse jumped awkwardly. Zeb barely saved himself from hitting the dirt. The animal started to limp badly, favored his off front leg.

Zeb looked for a wound but couldn't find any evidence that a slug had hit him. He cursed savagely at the bad turn of luck. "Must have picked up a rock," he muttered.

A glance over his shoulder showed him that the four outlaws were gaining rapidly. He looked for a place to hole up, make a fight. It was the only thing he could do.

A narrow, mesquite choked draw opened to his right. He swung the gray into it. One quick glance and Zeb pulled up. He was in a trap. The draw ended up against a steep, rocky slope. But it was too late to turn back now; he gave the horse the spurs. Two hundred yards further and he pulled in back of a bunch of big boulders that had tumbled down the slope. He hit the ground, snatched out his rifle and raced for a good position among the big rocks.

The outlaws came on at a run. Zeb opened up, firing through the thick mass of mesquite with his thirty-thirty. They scattered, swung away. Minutes later Zeb saw them slipping back into the draw on foot, dodging quickly from rock to rock for cover.

The light was fading fast. It was nearly dark. Long shadows of the hills spread heavily over the draw, extended out over the slope below.

"Just one chance," Zeb thought.

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"I'll have to hold up those skunks until it's good and dark, then try to make it up into the hills on foot."

He could see no movement below, but outlaw slugs were searching his cover. They slammed against the rocks, screamed shrilly away over his head. In the darkness, Zeb could make out no definite targets. He held his fire. No use wasting his shells on guesswork targets.

Then suddenly he remembered the big ball of stout fish line that he had found in his saddlebags when he stowed his lunch, back at the ranch. A scheme dawned in his brain. He crawled slowly and cautiously back to his horse, got the ball of line, sneaked across the narrow brush choked draw and up the opposite slope among the jungle of mesquite, in the gloom.

Zeb cut short lengths of cord, busied himself putting his scheme into readiness. He had started back toward his position among the boulders, paying out the cord, when he heard a flat toned, drawling voice down below call, "Hey! Scar!" A heavy booming voice came back, "Yeh. What is it, Dix?"

"We better be gettin' them Steeldust broncs an' high-tailin' outa here. That danged Sheriff from Two Arrows 'll be gittin' out this way before long," Dixie called.

"Gotta get this skunk first. He can't get away. We got 'im trapped. Start closin' in, everybody. It's dark enough now."

"Aw, let 'im go. His hoss is hit. I saw 'im limp. Anyhow, most like he's just some driftin' cow poke. Let 'im go. Can't do no harm. Them danged colts'll hold us back a heap."

"Driftin' cow poke, hell," Scar boomed. "I seen 'im on our trail twice, before we jumped 'im. You all seen 'im follerin' us. Get the skunk!"

ZEB HEARD a dry branch snap, down the draw, a growled curse. He hurried on, settled himself among the boulders, waited.

The outlaws were closing in cautiously but Zeb heard sounds—a rock rolling under a boot sole, a dry

(Continued On Page 76)

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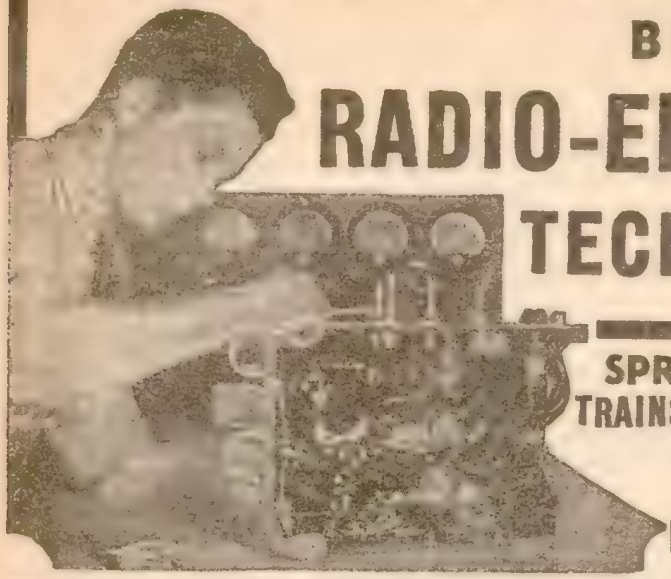

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(Continued From Page 74)

branch crack here and there. He watched closely. A shadowy figure moved slowly, about a hundred yards down the draw. Zeb jerked on one of the pieces of fish line that he held in his hand. Up on the other side of the draw a six-gun blasted.

"He's moved. Up there on the other side. Get 'im," Scar yelled. Instantly, a volley of shots came from the outlaws. They were all shooting at the spot where his six-gun had belched flame.

Zeb cupped his hands over his mouth, yelled, "Hands up! We got yuh covered." A fresh burst of fire was his answer. All the outlaws were aiming at the slope opposite. He leveled his rifle, fired three shots, fast, into the brush down the draw. Then he jerked the other cord that he held. Once more that blasting report from across the way. He fired twice more with his rifle.

"It's a trap! The draw's full of 'em. It's the sheriff, maybe. Come on! Vamoose!" Scar's booming voice yelled. Zeb could hear the outlaws running through the brush wildly, falling, scrambling up, cursing, yelling. He poured slugs after them with his rifle, shooting blindly at the sounds, then climbed from his boulders, started down the draw at a run. If he could catch the outlaws mounted and in the open, they would make better targets.

Then suddenly he stopped, jumped to his left. He had seen dimly, the form of a man on the ground.

Zeb watched that form carefully for a minute. It didn't move. "Must be done for," he muttered. He crawled forward. The man was dead, lying flat on his back. Zeb got out a match, struck it, took one quick look, blew it out. The dead man was Dixie, the one who had shot him, back at the pass.

Zeb sat back on his heels for a minute. "No tellin' whether one of my six-guns, tied up there in the mesquite, got 'im, or if I got 'im with the rifle," he thought. "But anyhow this helps a heap. None of the other three ever saw me." He jumped to his feet and started back up the draw to retrieve his six-guns and see if

he could find out what ailed the gray horse.

He was untying his Colts from the branches of the mesquite trees when he heard horses travelling at a run, out in the flat below the hills. Long experience told him that there were at least seven or eight horses in that bunch.

"Might be Sheriff Glaser and his posse from Two Arrows," Zeb reasoned. "And again, it might be them danged outlaws leadin' my colts. Anyhow, I can't take chances. I got to beat 'em to the Verde ford. Once they get across into the malpais country they're gone. And without them colts to sell to Park Fraser, I'll have no money to send Mary east. I just got to get that money."

He raced back up the draw to his horse, raised the gray's off front hoof. As he had suspected, a chunk of flint was wedged between the frog and the shoe. He snatched a hoof cleaning hook from the saddlebags and quickly yanked the flint from the animal's hoof.

Zeb reloaded, rammed his two six-guns down firmly into leather, thrust his thirty-thirty into the saddle boot and swung up. Outside the blind draw he pulled up and listened for a few minutes. He heard nothing from either direction, wheeled and hit the trail south, using his spurs freely. The gray swung into his long coupled, smooth run.

But Zeb knew that it would do no good to run the outlaws down. They would hear him coming. Three against one. The odds were too great, out in the open. He'd have to head them off at the ford, maybe take up a good position where he could have some chance to even the odds.

He knew that this good trail followed along at the foot of the hills in a great half circle bending toward the east, and ending at the Verde ford, where the river cut across it. He watched the country on his left. Then abruptly, he left the trail and headed into the desert, straight for the ford, across country. He was taking a wide chance, but it was the only one left to him. The desert at


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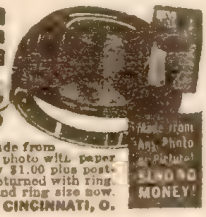


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the foot of the hills, was full of arroyos, gullies and cut banks from the winter floods coming down off high ground.

But the gray was smart. He'd have to leave most of it to the gallant animal to dodge these places. There was no other way, if he was to make the ford ahead of the outlaws.

Out here in the open, the light was better. The sky was a big dome of velvet, studded with millions of big stars and the gray ran strongly, wheeling, dodging, plunging down into gullies, grunting up out of them with mighty thrusts of his powerful haunches. Zeb rode his stirrups, straining his eyes into the darkness, swinging the racing horse this way and that, past obstructions. He was well away from the good trail, up to his right. He was banking heavily on the six colts holding the outlaws back, keeping them from making time, even on the better footing.

The gray was blowing hard, running slower, when Zeb at last spotted a light ahead. He pulled the horse down to a fast lope, watched the base of the hills to his right for sign of the outlaws. He saw no one, heard nothing.

He pulled down to a walk, watching everything carefully and kept on until, from the top of a low rise, he saw Malpais Joe's low 'dobe saloon beside the ford of the Verde. The place had had a bad reputation as an outlaw hangout for a long time.

ZEB STEPPED down, studied the lay carefully. He could see by the faint light from the stars that there were no horses tied at the long log hitch rack. Lights glowed in the saloon, laid oblong patches on the ground outside. He could see no customers inside. Just one thing to it. Either the outlaws had beaten him to the ford and were already safe in the rough malpais country on the other side of the Verde, or they had been held up by the Steeldust colts and were still on the trail. If they were across the river, he was beaten. Mary was doomed.

Zeb doubted that the outlaws could pass up the chance for a last

(Continued On Page 80)

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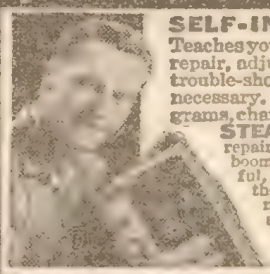

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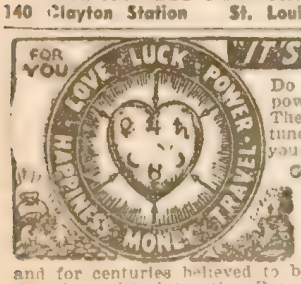


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(Continued From Page 78)

drink. He was betting that they would stop at Malpais Joe's for a few minutes, anyway, if they were still on the trail. That is, if Sheriff Glazer from Two Arrows, was not already hot after them. He got out his lunch and ate a sandwich, stopping his chewing every few minutes to listen.

For a half hour he heard nothing. His mind seethed with anxiety and doubt. He led the gray back into good cover and tied him, made his way carefully down the slope toward the saloon. Near the bottom, he heard horses coming and crouched low in the mesquite. A minute later, his heart leaped with satisfaction when he saw three men pull up in front of Malpais Joe's, leading his six colts. He had beaten them to the ford.

The men stayed in their saddles, listening. A tall, thin rider rode up to the saloon and peered inside through a window. "Noboby here," he called to the others.

Scar bellowed, "We shook 'em. Lost 'em, complete. Nobody follerin' us. We would o' seen 'em from the hollow back yonder as they cut the sky line comin' over the ridge. I been watchin' an' listenin', careful."

A thick, heavy voice said, "I am thirst. We go in Malpais Joe's, get drink. No?"

"Yeh, Pedro," Scar grunted. "We'll likker up, some. I'm dry as dust. Gotta be movin' quick, though. That danged sheriff 'll be gettin' here pronto, with a posse. We left a plain trail from the pass, headin' for the ford. He won't miss that. Surprised he ain't on our heels already. But we had a big lead on 'im. I reckon it'll be safe, all right."

The three outlaws stepped down stiffly, tied their horses and the colts, ran inside yelling, "Hey! Joe! Git busy! Set out the drinks."

Zeb was strongly tempted to get his horse, untie the colts and try to sneak out on the back trail. But he gave that up immediately. The men inside couldn't help hearing him. They'd cut him down, quick.

HE SNEAKED up to the side of the saloon, picking every step carefully, and peered through a window. The big outlaw Scar, black headed, burly and with a long livid knife scar on the left side of his jowls leaned against the bar at the farther end, a half empty glass in his hand. A heavy set, swarthy hombre leaned against the farther wall, tilting a bottle of whiskey. He had long, straight black hair. His eyes were small and black, like shoe buttons. This would be Pedro. The third, a tall thin man with red hair, sat at a table almost under the window through which Zeb peered. He was drinking greedily.

Malpais Joe, an undersized, weasel-like little man stood behind his bar, grinning. He had sharp, snake-like little eyes set close together on either side of a beak nose.

Zeb drew back, loosened his six-guns in leather so that they rode high and easy. Twice, he heard one or other of the men go to the door and peer outside, then clump back across the floor. Scar growled in his unmistakable voice, "Come on, you hombries. Drink up. We gotta git for the malpais, pronto. That danged sheriff, or maybe the bunch we trapped in the draw. . . We gotta look out, now."

Zeb felt like the man who has caught a skunk. Now that he had caught these men, what could he do about it? They were scattered all over the saloon. He couldn't just step in and stick them up. Couldn't cover them all with his guns. He wouldn't have a chance.

Suddenly he heard Scar let out his loud, roaring laugh, end up with that peculiar deep, growling intake of breath. Zeb froze for an instant, cursed softly. He leaped back to the window, peered in through the dirty pane carefully. "By hell! It is him," he muttered. "Scar Hansen! Now I know 'im. That laugh of his. Knew I'd heard that before."

He was remembering that there wasn't a sheriff in Texas who wasn't looking for Scar. More money on his scalp than Stetson had hats. Then, "Hell! Why not?" he thought.

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"Bounty huntin' ain't just in my line. But I shore need that money. I gotta get 'im alive. Couldn't pack a dead one from here to Texas in this heat." He grinned to himself as he realized that if he could take Scar Hansen he wouldn't have to sell his Steeldust colts.

Zeb turned quickly and looked back up the trail that led to Borico pass. He knew as well as Scar Hansen that Sheriff Glazer couldn't be much longer in getting here with a posse. He'd have to finish this job quickly if he expected to cash the reward on Scar. If the law rode in and made the capture, he wouldn't get a cent of it, and time was fast running out.

His mind was made up. It would be a tremendous risk. All three of these outlaws would be greased lightning with a six-gun. They lived by their guns, particularly Scar Hansen. He had a reputation all over Texas as a gunslinger. But here was Zeb's chance to get the cash he had to have, and save his colts at the same time.

BIG ZEB checked his guns once more. He sneaked back from the saloon, made his way down near the ford. Then, pulling his flat topped black Stetson well down over his bandaged head to shade his eyes, he rolled a smoke, lit it and strolled toward the front door of Malpais Joe's singing at the top of his voice;

*"Last night as I lay on the prairie*
*And looked at the stars in the sky,*
*I wondered if ever a cowboy*
*Would drift to that sweet by and by."*

He drew a long breath, hoping for the breaks, kicked the heavy door open and stepped inside, pulling on his smoke.

All three of the outlaws jumped, their six-guns leaped into their hands. They stood watching Zeb closely.

Zeb pulled back, feigning surprise. Then he grinned, half raised his hands. "Say! All I wanted was a drink or two. Or do you fellers want it all?" he said quietly.

(Continued On Page 84)

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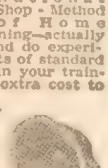

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(Continued From Page 82)

Scar Hansen and his men relaxed. The heavy set, swarthy Pedro grinned. "All right, cowboy," Scar grunted. "Reckon there's enough for all of us." He dropped his guns into leather, picked up his glass. The others followed suit, but their eyes never left him for long. They were taking no chances.

But Malpais Joe didn't grin. His sharp, snake-like eyes never left Zeb's face for an instant. He seemed puzzled over something, and Zeb didn't miss the menace in the little saloon keeper's regard. He had never been in this place, but evidently Joe was bothered about something concerning him.

Zeb strolled casually to the bar. "Howdy. Gimme a glass of whiskey." Malpais Joe grunted, poured out the liquor.

Zeb threw a coin on the bar, turned and started for a table near the door. Here he could get a clear view of the whole room. But the muscles of his back crawled as he faced away from Scar and Pedro, in the other end of the forty foot room. He put down his glass, pulled out a stool and settled himself, well clear of the table.

"Pedro, you an' Slim take a look an' see if them hosses are all right," Scar ordered, a few minutes later. He was leaning half over the bar. He winked broadly. "Seems like I heard 'em kickin' around," he grunted.

PEDRO AND Slim grinned, stepped to the door and stood listening for a minute, then walked back inside. Slim made for the bar with an empty glass, stood near Scar. Pedro went back to lean against the wall, carrying his bottle.

This was what Zeb had been waiting for. All three of the outlaws were where he could easily cover them. He drained his glass and slowly got to his feet. If he started for the bar carrying his glass, then accidentally dropped it when he reached the center of the room, stooped to pick it up and straightened, guns out, he'd have them.

He was reaching for the glass where it stood on the table when suddenly, Malpais Joe brought his open

(Continued On Page 86)

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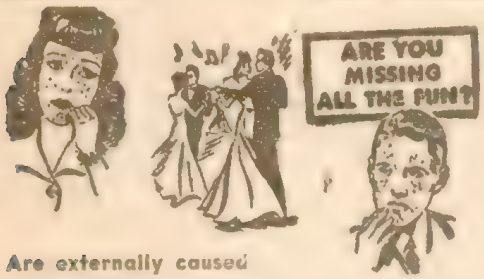


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(Continued From Page 84)

palm down on the bar with a sharp crack. "Look out!" he squeaked. "It's Big Zeb Winters—Texas Ranger." He ducked down behind his bar.

This was the show-down. But not the kind that Zeb had planned. He straightened, his hands flashed down and up in a blur of desperate speed. He leaped to his left just as Slim fired. Zeb felt the tearing impact of a slug along his right side. He staggered, knocked off balance for an instant. Then his guns were bucking in his hands as Slim fired again, and missed. He saw Slim falter, his gun hands sag as he fell.

Pedro was in full run for the door, firing wildly. Zeb threw a slug at him and saw him stagger, fall. The room rocked with the blasting roar of forty-fives. Gun smoke swirled thickly.

Scar Hansen's eyes went wild and startled when Malpais Joe shouted his warning. He whirled, pushed away from the bar. His hands went for his guns. But the action had been fast and sudden, he hadn't had time for a shot in his surprise at the sudden turn of events.

Zeb wheeled for a quick leap for the window. He felt his wound keenly, knew that he was bleeding badly, was afraid that he would fall any minute. But out of the corner of his eye he saw the barrels of a scatter gun coming up over the bar. He swung about, jumped full speed for the near end of the bar and whipped a shot at those twin barrels as he ran. They abruptly disappeared.

Big Zeb felt a numbing blow deep in his left shoulder as he dived for the bar. Scar had had time to put in one more quick shot during the lightning fast action. Zeb's left gun fell from his nerveless hand. He crawled behind the bar, rose to a crouch and stepped fast for its farther end. Malpais Joe dropped his shot gun, scuttled before him like a rabbit and ran for the door. Zeb let him go.

"Drop them guns, Scar Hansen," Zeb bluffed from behind the bar. There was no answer. He jumped to his feet, his right gun ready.

(Continued On Page 88)

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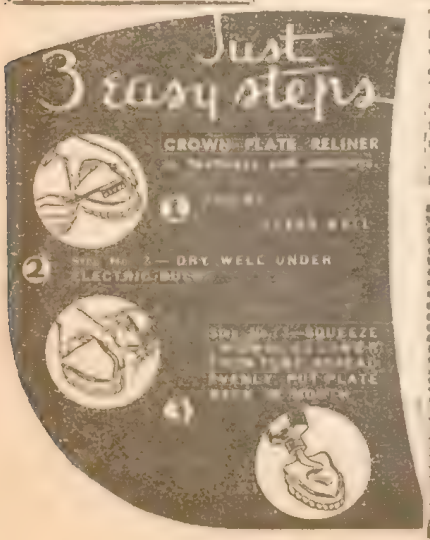


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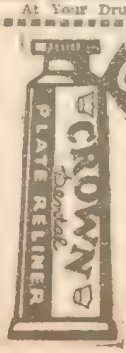


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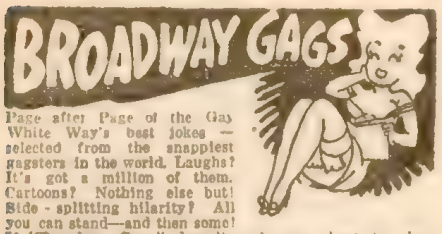


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(Continued From Page 86)

SCAR WAS making for the door, running noiselessly on the balls of his feet. "Hold it!" Zeb shouted. The big scar-faced outlaw stopped so fast that he nearly fell. He dropped his guns. His hands came up. "Don't shoot. Don't shoot!" he bawled.

Over by the window, Pedro was sitting up, his hands on his head. He was groaning softly.

"Turn around and kick yore guns over here, Scar," Zeb snapped, leaning over the bar. The big outlaw did as he was ordered. "Throw Pedro's guns with yours," came the next order. "And don't try nothin' if you want to live."

"Now get over there by the wall and sit beside Pedro," Zeb directed. "And keep yore hands where I can see them."

Zeb wondered what had become of Malpais Joe, and his eyes darted constantly from one window to another.

But now that the action was over Zeb felt a fast let-down. His head started to swim. He laid his gun down, reached over, grabbed a glass of whiskey standing on the bar and drained it at a gulp. A warm glow spread over him as the fiery liquor hit his stomach. His head steadied, ceased to whirl. But those windows, and Malpais Joe out there in the screening darkness, bothered him. He hunkered down at the end of the bar where he could see Scar and Pedro sitting by the wall and at the same time, be hidden from the windows.

"So you're Big Zeb Winters," Scar Hansen said slowly. "I knew danged well I'd seen yuh before somewhere, all the time. But I couldn't place yuh. Lucky for you I didn't."

"Same here, Scar. I knew I should remember that mule laugh of your'n. Anyhow, I did place yuh when I saw yuh through the window, before I came in. And them six Steeldust colts are mine, Scar. That's where yuh slipped; stealin' my hosses."

ZEB WAS grinning confidently, but he knew his wounds were bleeding fast. He was getting weaker steadily. If he lost consciousness he

(Continued On Page 90)

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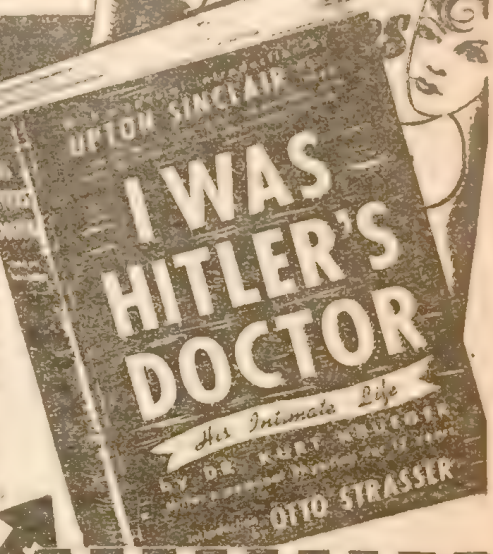


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(Continued From Page 88)

was as good as dead. Only one thing to do; he'd have to tie Scar and Pedro with their belts and whatever rope he could find in the saloon, before he passed out.

Zeb was getting his feet under him to carry out this plan when he heard the pounding of hoofs, coming down the trail. "Malpais Joe comin back," flashed through his mind. He crouched behind the bar, his gun ready, his eyes on the windows.

A voice that sounded familiar, shouted from outside, "Come on out here, all you hombries. And keep yore hands up." It was Sheriff Glazer from Two Arrows, on the trail of the outlaws. Zeb's heart leaped with relief.

"Come on in an' get 'em, Sheriff," he shouted. "This is Zeb Winters, and I got some men yuh might want."

A minute later the door was kicked open and Sheriff Glazer stood, a gun in each hand, looking in. There was a posse behind him. A grin spread over the Sheriff's face. "Big Zeb Winters—ex Ranger," he boomed. "Can't forget the old days when there's owlhoots loose in the land, can yuh Zeb?"

Big Zeb grinned rather weakly, gestured toward Scar, Pedro and Slim with the barrel of his gun. "There's what's left of 'em, Sheriff," he said. "One other, Malpais Joe, is still loose."

"No he ain't," Sheriff Glazer contradicted. "We run 'im down, up there on the hill a piece." He took a good look at the prisoners. "Who yuh got here?" he asked. "Seems like I seen this big scar face somewheres."

"Most likely seen his face on a reward notice," Zeb said. "He's Scar Hansen. Wanted down Texas way for more crimes than you can shake a stick at. Twenty-five hundred reward on 'im. I aim to collect. Need the money bad, for my wife, Mary. And by grab Sheriff, now I won't have to sell my six Steeldust colts! I'm shore glad of that, too."

* * *

A month later, Big Zeb and young

(Continued On Page 92)

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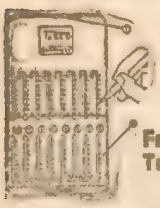

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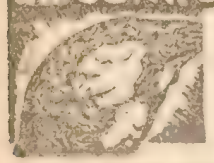

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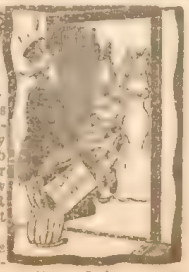

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(Continued From Page 90)

Zeb stood at the little red brick railway station in Two Arrows and watched the east bound pull out. Mary stood on the rear platform with little Ann in her arms and waved to them as long as she could see them.

(THE END)

*Answers to Wild West Quiz 2 on Page 61*

1. A hanging
2. A part of the saddle
3. Spanish
4. Riding the range, since a *cayuse* is a horse.
5. Pistol holster
6. Leather pants
7. Pie-filling
8. An unbranded yearling
9. A raincoat
10. Cover the head as a *sombrero* is a hat.


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### Mountain Men Don't Quit

(Continued From Page 43)

Mitch Tarson came up the trail to stand beside his grandson's horse. Crad was watching the helpless killer with no pity in his scowling blue eyes.

"Why didn't you kill me?" Sargeant screamed.

"Mebbe it was because you didn't shoot a woman," Crad Tarson said grimly. "You won't ever trigger another gun, and old Mitch and me both throwed off our shots to make you live. You'll do plenty of time in the prison over at Deer Lodge!"

"I give up!" Sargeant moaned. "I quit, and I don't want to live. I killed your Dad, Charley Tarson!"

Crad Tarson trembled as a swift wave of terrible anger flooded through his veins. The gun in his hand came up, centered on Sargeant's left breast, and the outlaw braced himself for the shock. Then Crad Tarson slowly lowered his cocked six-shooter.

"You'll live long enough to hang," he told Joe Sargeant, and his voice was husky with restraint. "Me and old Mitch swore to find my Dad's killer, and to watch while he choked to death on the end of a rope."

"That's what ever," Mitch Tarson seconded the verdict. "Crad and me made a promise, and mountain men don't quit!"

(THE END)

### Killer's Bonanza

(Continued From Page 52)

zling against the red hot stove. He didn't flinch. The "Ghost Killer" was beyond all feeling.

The sheriff holstered his smoking six-guns and went to take the handcuffs off Dan's wrists. The boy grinned at him, and hooked a thumb at the gold dust spilled on the desk.

"For the operation?" he asked, and his grin widened when old Mosshead nodded.

"I should have knowed you wouldn't lie to me, younker," he said huskily. "I let you down, but I reckon I'll make it up to you now—me and Frank Hanna and old Pete Jebro!"

(THE END)

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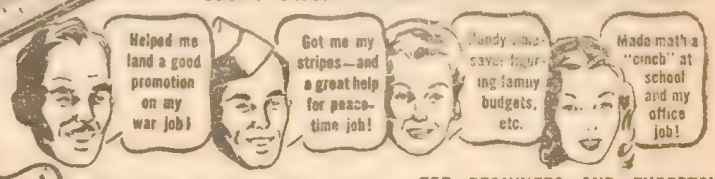
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## Aces Up—Bullets Wild!

(Continued From Page 25)

Already Hooker was pulling his gun. Coldly, Tim Shane let him start his draw. He felt calm, confident. Now, Hooker's .45 was rising, nosing over leather. Tim felt his own gun kick back.

Gun-roar echoed. Bystanders fell back, fell to the floor. A bullet ripped into Tim's wrist. But, before he dropped his Colt, he fired twice. And then, a shaggy, heavy clump, Rad Hooker lay on the floor. The deputy was the first to find his voice.

"Dang, Tim, so he killed him, huh? Sneaked in an' murdered him an' then tried to blame it on you. . . "

Tim sat down on a chair. Blood dripped from his wrist. He wiggled his fingers, decided the wrist was broken.

"So Mike—he was in bed?" asked the deputy.

Tim grinned. "No, he wasn't sick. I just built that up to make Rad Hooker sorta get the creeps an' wonder who was crazy, me or him."

"That—medicine?"

"T'ain't medicine, Snyder. That's a powder I put on my hands when I gamble. Makes the cards easier to handle."

"But the blood—on his shirt. I never saw any—"

"Look," said Tim.

Snyder rolled the dead man over. The front of Hooker's shirt was matted with blood.

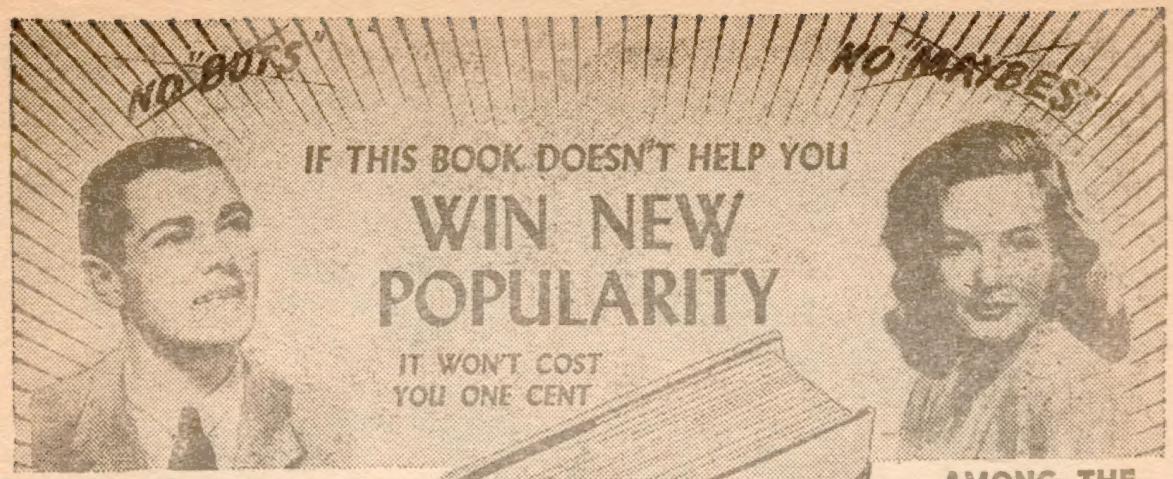
"Blood there, ain't it?" asked Tim.

"Sure there is—now. . . " Suddenly something crept over the deputy's rugged face. "You mean he never had no blood there—you just tricked him?"

"You figure that out," said Tim. He studied his wrist carefully. "I wonder if doc can fix this so I can keep on playin' poker. You learn a lot in a poker game—" He lifted whimsical eyes to the deputy. "—you learn how to outbluff a man. . . "

The deputy mopped his forehead. "I reckon so," he agreed, limply.

(THE END)

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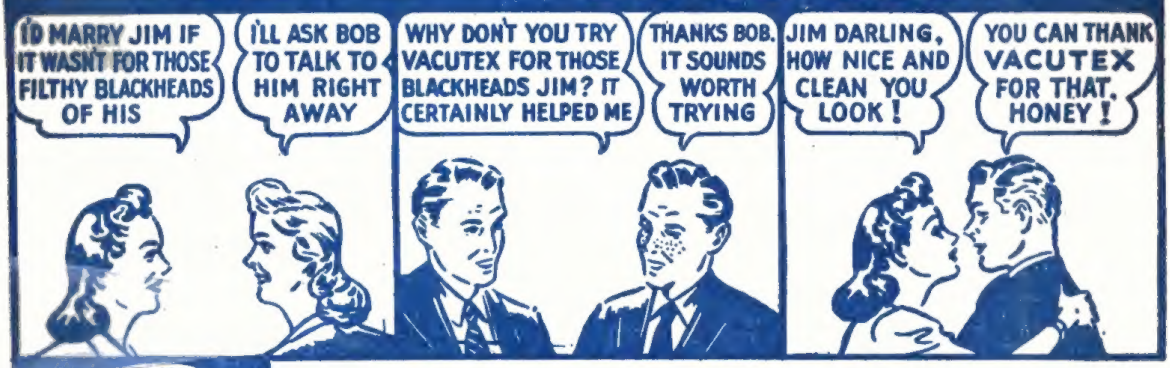
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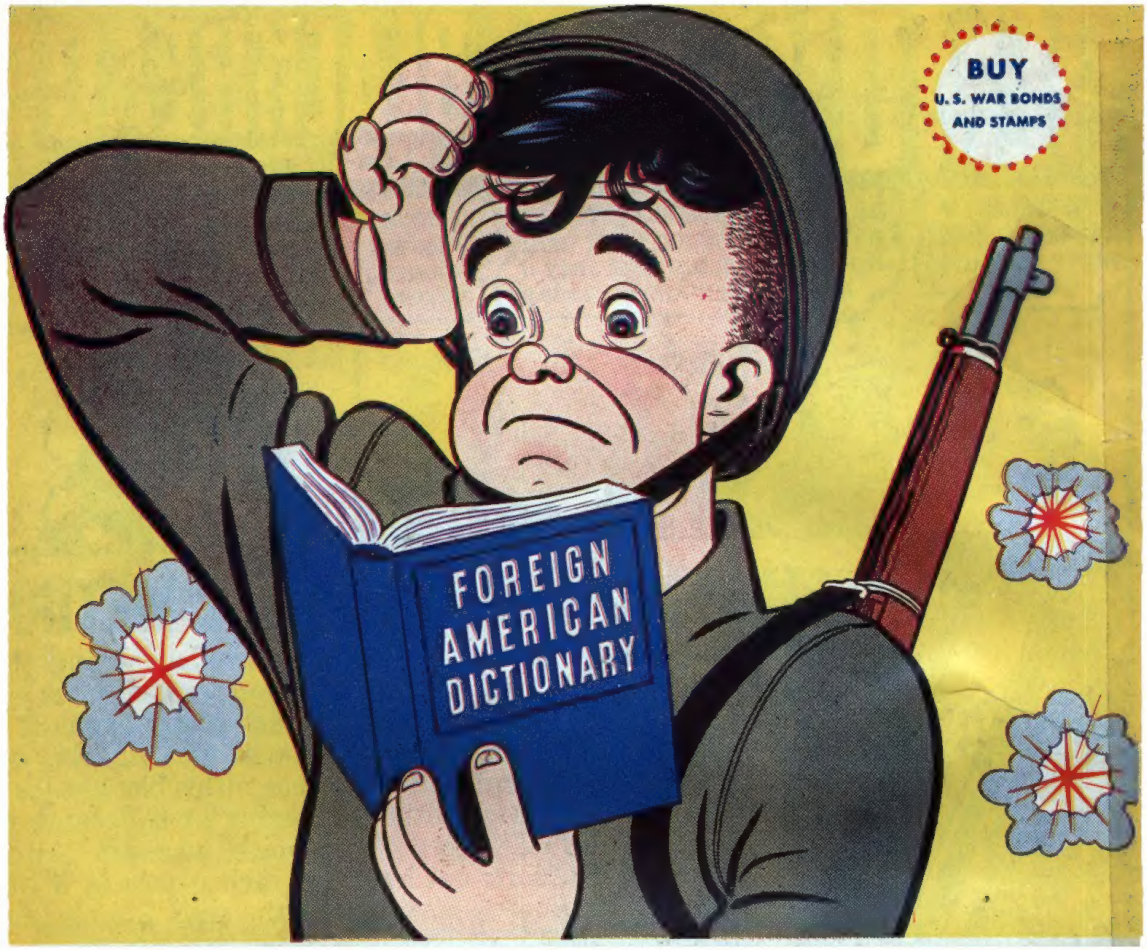


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